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## Third-Culture Students: An Exploratory Study of Transition in the First Year of College

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THIRD-CULTURE STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF TRANSITION IN THE  
FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE

By

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Bachelor of Arts  
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
Educational Administration, Higher Education  
College of Education

University of South Carolina

2010

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## **DEDICATION**

To my husband, Jon.

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

People often ask me why I chose to study third-culture students for my dissertation since I have not personally lived abroad. The experiences I had teaching and advising these students impacted me in such a way that I could not shake the curiosity to study their experiences in the college setting. I am very grateful for the students who were open and willing to share their stories. There is no doubt that my favorite part of this process was the time I spent with each of them on their respective college campuses. I am also grateful to so many others who helped me during this process.

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source of joy on days when this process was laborious and lonely. Mandy and Betsy, thank you for your constant encouragement, prayers, and for believing I would finish well. Betsy, there is no doubt the Starbucks gift cards you gave me provided the jolt of caffeine I needed to stay up writing!

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of third-culture students who repatriated to the United States for their first year of college. In the context of this research, third-culture students are American children who lived overseas as a result of their parents' professions for two or more years immediately prior to returning to the United States to attend a university. Useem (1993) defines "third-culture" as the new style of life that is created, learned, and shared from blending first-culture experiences and customs from a country of origin (i.e., "home" country) with second-culture knowledge acquired from living in a foreign country or countries (i.e., "host" country[ies]). Third-culture students are further categorized into subpopulations labeled by the parents' professions or overseas sponsoring organization: business, government, military, and missionary (Cottrell, 2002). In particular, this study addressed a gap in the literature—whether there were differences among the experiences of these subpopulations of third-culture students.

The method of investigation included 26 one-on-one interviews and two follow-up focus group interviews with students identified as third-culture. An inductive research approach was employed as well as a constant comparative analysis of the data to draw final conclusions. Data collection and analysis were guided by Pollock and Van Reken's (2001) four-category cultural domain taxonomy (i.e., foreigner, hidden immigrant, adopted, and mirror), which is based on physical and cognitive attributes (e.g., looks

alike/different; thinks alike/different). This conceptual framework provided a unique lens to view participants' relationships with their surrounding culture, resulting in the development of a theory of variance among the domains.

The findings revealed that (a) the majority of participants were in the hidden immigrant cultural domain during their first semester of college (i.e., physically resemble their American peers but think differently in terms of norms, values, and beliefs) and (b) significant variations were observed among the students in terms of differentness from their country-of-origin peers or the overall American culture. Furthermore, a correlation was established between the expressed levels of differentness and reported degree difficulty with the first-year college transition.

The study also revealed differences among third-culture subpopulations: most notably, students whose parents were international business workers experienced the greatest degree of difficulty with identity issues. Major qualitative themes that emerged from the data included Identity, Relationships With Peers, Culture Shock, Support, and Concept of Home.



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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The demographical make up of the United States has shifted significantly in the past two decades. Between 1990 and 2000 alone, the foreign-born population<sup>1</sup> in the United States increased by more than half (Malone, Baluja, Constanzo, & Davis, 2003). In describing this American society that has become more globally diverse, Storti (1999) states,

Few of us live any longer in a monocultural world. We work with people from other cultures, live next door to them, study in class with them, or teach them.

They may be our customers, our competition, or our in-laws. (p. 1)

In addition to changes taking place on home soil, greater numbers of Americans are moving abroad. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that more than four million Americans were living overseas in 2004. Forrester Research, a Cambridge, Massachusetts marketing research firm, estimates that by the year 2015, over three million Americans will move overseas for high-tech and service industry jobs. This figure represents 2% of the entire U.S. workforce (Teicher, 2003). Wennersten (2008) cites several reasons Americans migrate overseas, including (a) the prospect of better wages; (b) growing globalization, including the essential role of U.S. exports of goods, services, and expertise; and (c) the advancement of American economic, political, or cultural interests around the world.

### **THIRD-CULTURE STUDENTS**

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<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau (2000) considers anyone who is not born a U.S. citizen to be foreign born.

Useem (1993) labeled dependent youth who accompany their parents overseas “third-culture kids” because they leave their country of origin (i.e., “home” country) to live in a foreign country or countries (second or “host” culture). The new style of life created, learned, and shared by these young people is their third-culture (Useem). The cross-cultural experience also affects adults; however, Pollock and Van Reken (2001) postulated that the impact was more profound for youth between birth and 18 years of age “when the child’s sense of identity, relationships with others, and view of the world are being formed in the most basic ways” (p. 27). While the term *third-culture kid* is associated with children who have spent their formative years abroad, for the purposes of this study, the phrase will be amended to *third-culture students* to reflect the focus on the experiences of kids who have matured into postsecondary students.

Subpopulations of third-culture students are identified by the parents’ profession or overseas sponsoring organization: business, government, military, and missionary (Cottrell, 2002). Any comparisons of these specific student groups in the literature typically occur between the subpopulations and their American counterparts, rather than between one subpopulation to another (e.g., Bounds, 2008; Cuidon, 2009; Klemens, 2008). The current study addresses this gap in the literature by intentionally exploring potential commonalities and differences between the various third-culture student subpopulations in regard to their first-year college transition.

Transition in the first year of college involves a process influenced by factors such as academic performance; involvement in extra- or cocurricular experiences; ability to connect with faculty, staff, and peers; relationships with parents; and personal characteristics and attributes (Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 1989). When first-year students

navigate new experiences in the college environment, challenges are often a part of the process. Many first-year students experience a sense of loss as a result of the changes of being in a new environment; some experience despair when relationships change or are replaced (Paul & Sigal, 2001). In the present study, the first-year transition for third-culture students refers to the process that is not only influenced by the college factors mentioned above but also by their third-culture identity.

Researchers have found that the first-year transition can be especially difficult for international students adjusting to new social norms and experiencing challenges such as geographic distance from family and friends (Yildirim, 2009). Foreign students who attend colleges and universities in the United States are “exposed to new and different societal values, roles, rights and responsibilities. In short, they are suddenly in an alien culture, which requires a significant adaptation” (Dunnett, 1981, p. 79).

Third-culture students, like foreign students, are coming to college from life abroad and may encounter many of the same challenges as their international counterparts; however, these students are also going through repatriation—“the process of readjusting, reacculturating, and reassimilating into one’s own home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period of time” (Gaw, 1995, p. 3). Students may find that their home-country peers have a different worldview or behaviors or that their country of origin is unfamiliar or changed (Fontaine, 1983; Gaw; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Useem & Downie, 1976). Pollock and Van Reken also note that third-culture students may face difficulties such as facing culture shock, feeling rootless from making multiple transitions, experiencing discomfort, and dealing with unresolved grief. Losses (e.g., people, places) throughout their lives are common for third-culture students



(Gilbert, 2008), and many deal with unresolved grief well into adulthood (Cockburn, 2002; Pollock & Van Reken; Schaetti, 2002; Van Reken & Bethel, 2005). The inability to overcome these kinds of hurdles can lead to further challenges such as depression, which has recently become more common among all college students (ACHA-NCHA, 2005).

Based on a review of the literature, the researcher anticipated third-culture students would potentially experience difficulty in their first-year transition. However, it was unknown whether there would be similarities or differences among subpopulations of third-culture students. The current study explored the transition of third-culture students through the narratives of 26 students, as well as data from two follow up focus groups. Data were analyzed using Pollock and Van Reken's (2001) four-category cultural domain taxonomy (i.e., foreigner, hidden immigrant, adopted, and mirror), which is based on physical and cognitive attributes (e.g., looks alike/different; thinks alike/different). This conceptual and organizational framework provided a unique lens to view the participants' relationships with their surrounding culture and to explore the transitional experiences occurring during their first year of college. The model also provided a means to measure the varying levels of differentness among students.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to extend the research on third-culture students by examining the first-year college transition of third-culture students at four higher education institutions across the United States (i.e., American University, Columbia International University, Lewis and Clark College, and the University of South Carolina). Potential commonalities and differences among the subpopulations of third-culture

students were also explored, filling a gap in the literature regarding intragroup comparisons. A qualitative approach was chosen to “discover a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives, and worldview of people involved, or a combination of these” (Merriam, 2002, p. 6).

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the transition experiences of third-culture students in their first year of college?
2. In what ways, if any, do the experiences of subpopulations of third-culture students vary?
3. What physical and attitudinal attributes differentiate third-culture students along a spectrum of variance?

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The transition experiences of third-culture students have been largely overlooked in the literature on the first-year experience, and Pollock and Van Reken (2001) refer to these students as an invisible population. Furthermore, the majority of extant research has been undertaken by investigators who are themselves current or former third-culture students (e.g., Devens, 2005; Risch, 2008; Schaetti, 2000; Shealy, 2003), thus creating the potential for bias. The present study was conducted by a researcher who did not grow up with a third-culture perspective—eliminating experiential bias and creating an opportunity for an outside view of this global subculture. The additional focus on intragroup comparisons (i.e., between all four subpopulations) as well as intergroup assessments (i.e., between third-culture students and their country-of-origin peers)

addresses a gap in literature, which has examined primarily intergroup similarities and differences predominantly with the missionary subgroup.

Third-culture students are similar to international students in that both groups are transitioning to college from lives abroad. The literature on international students has documented numerous potential challenges that these students face in their university adjustment, including loneliness, homesickness, and cultural adjustment (Yildirim, 2009). Extrapolating from the international student literature, it is posited that third-culture students could face similar challenges, in addition to the stressors of the repatriation process.

Lastly, this study holds significance for educators in higher education. With an understanding of the challenges faced by third-culture students, educators can facilitate these students' first-year college transition (e.g., identity formation, developing interpersonal relationships, learning independence, managing academic demands) at their respective institutions. Furthermore, parents and family members of third-culture students may use study findings to help their own students as they transition back to the United States to attend colleges and universities.

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

The following section defines terminology used in the current study.

**Acculturation-** The process of relearning cultural norms (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003)

**Culture-** The learned and shared behavior of a community of interacting human beings (Useem, Useem, & Donoghue, 1963)

**Enculturation-** The process of learning a culture (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003)

**Global nomad-** Anyone of any nationality who has lived outside their parents' country of origin before adulthood because of a parent's occupation (McCaig, 1996)

**Hidden immigrants-** Third-culture students who have lived in a second culture, yet their experience often goes unnoticed in their home culture (McCaig, 1996)

**Home/birth culture-** The culture in which the individual has citizenship (Useem, 1993)

**Host/second culture-** The overseas culture where the third-culture student lived (Useem, 1993)

**Intragroup-** Comparisons made between subpopulations of third-culture students

**Intergroup-** Comparisons made between third-culture students and country-of-origin peers

**Repatriation-** The process of returning to the home culture (Gaw, 1995)

**Third-culture kid/student-** Students who leave their country of origin (i.e., home country) to live in a foreign country or countries (i.e., second or host culture). The new style of life created, learned, and shared by these young people is their third culture (Useem, 1993).

**Third-culture adult-** Someone who grew up with the third-culture experience and is beyond the traditional college age (Cottrell & Useem, 1993)

## **ORDER OF PRESENTATION**

This chapter introduced the study of third-culture students who are repatriating to the United States to attend college and stated the significance of the research, including how the experiences of third-culture students have been largely overlooked in literature

on the first-year experience and that the challenges they face are potentially similar to those experienced by international students who also transition to college from life overseas. Three major research questions were offered that address how the study qualitatively explored (a) the transitional experiences of third-culture students in their first year of college, (b) commonalities and differences among the experiences of subpopulations, and (c) whether physical and attitudinal attributes differentiate third-culture students along a spectrum of variance.

The second chapter presents an overview of the literature on third-culture students, specifically focusing on the population as a whole, subpopulations, and additional variables such as gender. In addition, a discussion of culture, culture shock, and bicultural identity is provided to broaden the understanding of the participants' narratives in this study. Pollock and Van Reken's (2001) cultural domain model, which provided the conceptual and organizational framework for the research, is reviewed at the end of the chapter.

The third chapter presents the research strategy, methods, and justification for use of a qualitative approach. Site and participant selection are described, as are instrument development and administration. This chapter then identifies the data analysis techniques used, as well as the methods of ensuring trustworthiness. Finally, study limitations are addressed.

The study findings are presented in the fourth chapter and are discussed in context of the conceptual framework. The emergent qualitative themes (i.e., Identity, Relationships With Peers, Culture Shock, Support, and Concept of Home) and related subthemes are presented as well as the connections of both to the study's viewpoint.

The final chapter includes interpretations of the major findings of the study. Since the majority of research on third-culture students has focused on the children of missionaries or third-culture students and their country-of-origin peers, the findings and conclusions of the current study address the gap in literature by revealing commonalities and differences among subpopulations of third-culture students. Conclusions and recommendations for future practice are offered for educators, and potential areas of additional research are addressed.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This review of the literature opens with an overview of third-culture students, including defining characteristics such as cross-cultural living and high mobility. Research studies that enumerate current understandings of third-culture college students are highlighted and provide a context for the present study. An analysis of the different subpopulations of third-culture students (i.e., business, government, missionary, and military) is also presented. The chapter then offers a summary of cultural concepts, an important facet of the transition of third-culture students in their first year of college. The conceptual framework, presented in the concluding part of this chapter, also focuses on culture and the ways individuals are affected by their surrounding cultures.

### **THIRD-CULTURE STUDENTS**

Useem, Useem, and Donoghue (1962) were pioneers in the research of children growing up in countries and cultures different than their birth countries and studied youth in 76 countries. Useem (1993) used the term *third-culture* to describe children who accompany their parents and leave their country of origin (“home” country) for a foreign country or countries (second or “host” culture) and then blend these two cultural experiences to create a new style of life (“third-culture”). Figure 1 depicts this amalgamation process.

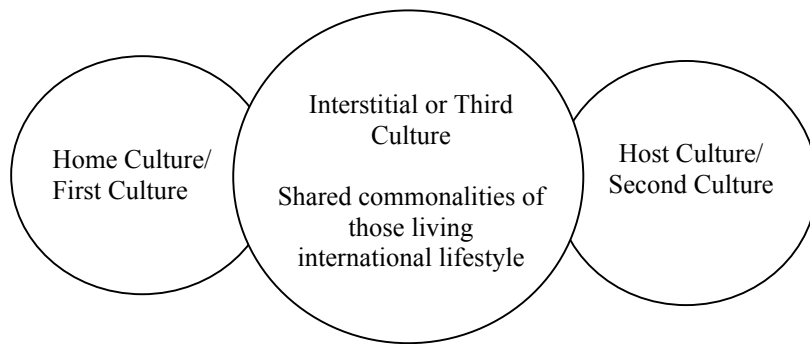


Figure 1. The third-culture context (Van Reken, n.d.)

Other less common terms in the literature include *global nomads* (McCaig, 1996), *transculturals* (Willis, Enloe, & Minoura, 1994), and *internationally mobile youth* (Gerner, Perry, Moselle, & Archbold, 1992). McCaig also used the labels *hidden immigrants* and *cultural chameleons* because third-culture students may look like their country-of-origin peers but think much differently, in terms of norms, values, and beliefs.

Pollock and Van Reken (2001) culminated 20 years of qualitative and quantitative research in the development of a working definition for third-culture students that is often documented in current literature. They define the third-culture kid as:

a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The third-culture kid builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the third-culture kid's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background. (p. 19)

While third-culture students may come from a variety of international backgrounds (e.g., a Brazilian living in Hong Kong), for purposes of this study, third-culture students are defined as American citizens who have lived abroad before returning to the United States the summer (i.e., May-August) before college.



## **General Characteristics**

Third-culture students tend to have more in common with each other than with their country-of origin counterparts. Two overarching realities that shape third-culture students' lives are that they are raised in a cross-cultural and highly mobile world (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001).

***Cross cultural world.*** Third-culture students are not simply observing, studying, or analyzing different cultures, they are living in them (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). While the necessary amount of time spent living abroad to be defined as third-culture is not specified in the literature, the duration of the experience outside the home culture is more than a two-week or even two-month vacation to see the sights (Pollock & Van Reken). Also, the depth of the cross-cultural impact on the development of the child is a result of a combination of multiple variables (e.g., the child's age, personality, and participation in the local culture) beyond simply the length of time spent in the host country (Pollock & Van Reken). The impact of this cultural immersion is often reflected in third-culture students' adulthood choices. Many "actively seek ways to expose their own children to the world's range of countries and cultures and purposely teach and model the valuable and enduring message that differences among people are cause for celebration, exploration, and respect" (Glicksberg-Skipper, 2000, para. 19).

***Highly mobile world.*** For some third-culture students, high mobility is characterized by physically moving from place to place. Pollock and Van Reken (2001) indicate that some third-culture students whose parents are in the military or diplomatic corps move to a different country every two or three years. For children whose parents are in the military service, moving could be a result of their parents' relocation of post or

taking furlough (i.e., a temporary leave of absence). In a study of 102 missionary children, ages 17-23, Bounds (2008) found that the mean number of moves or changes in residences from the time of their birth was 9.36, with the highest actual reporting of 23 moves.

Mobility also includes the transient nature of others around third-culture students. People around them as well as the backdrop of their physical surroundings are often changing (Cockburn, 2002). Many attend international high schools while they are abroad where student and staff mobility is a defining characteristic (Cockburn, 2002).

In addition to being a part of highly mobile, cross-cultural worlds, Pollock and Van Reken (2001) offer four characteristics that describe third-culture students who have lived in countries and cultures different than their home cultures: (a) distinct differences from peers, (b) expected repatriation, (c) privileged lifestyle, and (d) system identity.

***Distinct differences from peers.*** One unique characteristic of third-culture students is that they often experience hidden diversity (Van Reken & Bethel, 2005). Their diversity markers (e.g., different cultural background and world view) are not readily apparent on the outside, whereas common markers for other students (e.g., race, ethnicity, nationality) are typically noticeable within minutes of a first meeting (Van Reken & Bethel).

Researchers have described third-culture students as being on the margins of their home culture because, in their home country, they may look like their peers but they often think differently (Cockburn, 2002; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti & Ramsey, 2006). Cultural marginality, according to Landis, Bennett, and Bennett (2004), can be “encapsulating” or “constructive” (p. 157). With encapsulated marginality, “one’s

sense of self is stuck between cultures in a dysfunctional way” (Landis et al., p. 157). Encapsulated third-culture students feel caught between cultures in a nonadaptive way, often feeling there is no where to call home, and consequently their college transition would be challenging. Conversely, when cultural marginality is constructive, “identity is also on the margins of two or more cultures, but the ability to move easily in and out of cultural context is restored” (Landis et al., p. 157). Constructively marginal third-culture students feel at home everywhere (Pollock & Van Reken; Schaetti & Ramsey) and find the transition between cultures challenging (Storti, 1999; McLachlan, 2005).

***Expected repatriation.*** Third-culture students, unlike immigrants, expect to return to their home culture once the assignment or job opportunity overseas ends (Bounds, 2008; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001). For some third-culture students, repatriating to the United States to attend college is, in a sense, coming home. This can either help or hinder their first-year transition depending on how the college culture meets or does not meet their expectations.

***Privileged lifestyle.*** Pollock and Van Reken (2002) suggest that third-culture students frequently live in what could be considered elitist communities overseas because of the special privileges afforded their families, such as access to the commissary or PX (military), domestic services at hand (embassy or missionary compounds), and chauffeurs to drive the children to and from school and around town (diplomatic families). However, what is viewed as a luxury in the United States, is often considered a common middle-class practice or the cultural norm in a foreign country (e.g., cleaning or cooking services). These cultural differences can lead to potential social missteps and negative

judgments when third-culture students share their life experiences overseas with their new American peers.

***System identity.*** Third-culture students “may be more directly conscious than peers at home of directly representing something greater than themselves—be it their government, their company, or God” (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001, p. 23). Collier (2008) indicates that sponsoring organizations provide structure for third-culture students (e.g., policies, rules, values, expectations). In addition, some sponsoring organizations will provide services or reentry training for young people repatriating to the United States (e.g., Foreign Youth Service Foundation through the U.S. State Department, Mu Kappa for missionary students through Barnabas International). While these resources may benefit dependent youth in their repatriation, the impact or effectiveness on students’ transition to college has not been studied.

## **Subpopulations of Third-Culture Students**

As stated earlier, third-culture is a population nomenclature under which several subpopulations exist, defined by the occupation or sponsoring organization of the parents: missionary, military, business, and government (Cottrell, 2002). The following sections describe current understandings of each group and are ordered in terms of those with largest body of research presented first.

***Missionary.*** Prior to World War II, missionary kids (MKs) were the largest group of third-culture students (Cottrell, 2002). Research studies of missionary kids as they matured and attended college have grown in number and focus on areas such as repatriation experiences, sociocultural adaptation, and academic success (e.g., Collier, 2008; Klemmens, 2008; Wrobbel, 2005). The body of research includes a mélange of

qualitative and quantitative research studies. Some qualitative studies have focused on missionary kid narratives (e.g., Collier, 2008). Other studies, with qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches, compared missionary kids to their country of origin counterparts (e.g., Klemens, 2008). The majority have small homogeneous sample sizes (e.g., Bounds, 2008; Collier, 2008; Coschignano, 2000; Ferstad, 2002).

Missionaries and their families are typically part of a sponsoring organization during their experience overseas and upon returning to their home country (e.g., International Mission Board). Also, missionary kids who return to the United States to attend college may choose to join a local chapter of Mu Kappa International, a fraternal organization hosted on more than 40 college and university campuses across the United States and serving as a support network (Mu Kappa International, 2009).

Several studies have focused specifically on missionary kids in college or those who are coming to college. For example, Collier (2008) employed a qualitative study to elicit the repatriation narratives of 19 American missionaries. She examined the participants' repatriation experiences from (a) a national context—interaction with the host country; (b) an organizational context—policies, rules, and structure established by the sponsoring organization; and (c) a religious context. Participants described the difficulty in identifying home, articulating their multicultural identity, and coping with the sadness and depression associated with a longing to return to the host country. In response, Collier suggested that sponsoring organizations provide reentry training targeting these specific areas, and that colleges and universities expand housing options, particularly between semesters when MKs cannot travel home.

Klemens (2008) compared 64 missionary kids at a Christian university to 64 nonmissionary university students by measuring psychological well-being, ethnic identity, and sociocultural adaptation. He found that MKs scored significantly lower on tests of psychological well-being and sociocultural adaptation. However, no significant differences were found between MKs and non-MKs in terms of ethnic identity. As an explanation, Klemens suggested that the host country's impact might be lessened due to MKs' unique circumstances, such as attending international and boarding schools where the majority of their peers and instructors were ethnically similar. Study outcomes propose that MKs could benefit from individual therapy, better preparation for the transition home by the missionary organization, increased family support, and the addition of support networks such as Mu Kappa International.

Several studies of missionary kids' college experiences explored the role of religious support during the transition to college. Whether through personal faith or a sponsoring missions' organization, these students described a unique source of strength that supported them in their adjustment to college. Bounds (2008) investigated the relationship between religiosity and adjustment to college in a sample of 102 missionary kids who completed the Religious Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ-R). He reported that religious orientation was associated with a greater overall life satisfaction and psychological well-being.

Other studies of missionary kids transitioning to college investigated institutional adjustment and loneliness. Moss (1985) compared the experiences of missionary kids ( $n = 179$ ), Iranian students ( $n = 232$ ), and American students ( $n = 237$ ) in terms of their reported loneliness and difficulty adjusting to college. Moss found no difference between

missionary kids' and Iranian students' difficulty in areas such as social/personal adjustment. However, when compared to American students, there were higher levels of loneliness (more than 10%) among missionary kids.

***Military.*** Prior to the conclusion of World War II, children of military personnel comprised the largest number of third-culture students; 30%, as compared to government (23%), missionary (17%), business (16%), and other (14%) (Cottrell, 2002). Military students are estimated to be the most mobile of the third-culture subpopulations (Cottrell), frequently moving from base to base or overseas every three to four years (Paden & Pezor, 1993; Watanabe & Jensen, 2000).

The literature often focuses on the effects of stressors on military youth such as frequent separations. A recent phenomenological study on being raised in the military revealed 11 disparate but commonly noted themes identified by participants, ranging from drug and alcohol abuse and difficulties with commitment, to being world citizens with an appreciation for cultural diversity and tolerance (Shealy, 2003). This study further referenced commonalities among military third-culture students: (a) they live on military bases where membership is constantly changing; (b) they suffer the prolonged absence of a mother or father figure; (c) they are forced to leave the base once their military parent retires or is killed in combat; and (d) they are part of a militaristic patriarchy, constantly preparing for war.

In terms of challenges faced by military students, a study of American military teenagers living in Europe revealed that the first year abroad was the most difficult. However, their school experiences helped them to make friends with their peers and established greater levels of overall comfort and adjustment where classes or

extracurricular activities grouped students together based on abilities and interests (Tyler, 2002).

Coschignano (2000) examined the repatriation experiences for 20 third-culture adults whose average age was 41 years and who had lived abroad an average of 6.2 years since birth. When asked about their experiences during their repatriation back to their home countries, participants discussed the value of having a sponsoring organization during repatriation. One of the male participants reported, “I really avoided a lot of negative experiences that a lot of guys had [during re-entry] because I came back into a military community” (p. 75).

***Business and Government.*** No known studies exist that focus on business or government, third-culture college student subpopulations as the main variable of interest. The most informative study on these subpopulations was conducted by Cottrell (2002) who examined the career choices in a study of third-culture adults. The participants had lived abroad prior to World War II, and the researcher focused on the influences of this era on their career and educational choices. Cottrell found that the sponsor was a significant factor affecting a third culture family’s experience overseas because “the sponsor influences...how long a family serves overseas, its geographical mobility, and relations with Americans and host country nationals” (p. 231). While Cottrell was examining third-culture students at a different stage of life, the findings of her study in terms of family and sponsorship are applicable to the present study.

Further information for what is known about business and government subpopulations is based upon anecdotal evidence from the third-culture population. It is often assumed (but remains unsubstantiated) that their experiences reflect that of the rest



of the third-culture population (McCaig, 1996; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Schaetti, 2006; Useem, 1993).

***Additional units of study.*** In addition to research on the various subpopulations of students, several studies have investigated gender as the primary unit of study. Gerner and Perry (2000) compared the effects of gender differences in cultural acceptance and international career orientation among internationally mobile adolescents and their non-internationally mobile counterparts. This research was based on a previous study (Gerner, Perry, Moselle, & Archbold, 1992) that found greater cultural acceptance among internationally mobile youth as compared to their non-mobile U.S. counterparts. To test the effect of gender, the cultural acceptance among American students attending high schools in the United States ( $n = 222$ ) and international school settings ( $n = 789$ ) were compared and females (i.e., both internationally mobile and non-mobile) were found to be more accepting of other cultures, less stereotypic, and more open to travel and exposure to different languages. While these findings support the general impression of gender differences in attitudes between U.S. males and females, a key outcome was that the internationally mobile males moved closer to their female counterparts in terms of acceptance of other cultures than non-internationally mobile males. Therefore, Gerner and Perry concluded that an internationally mobile lifestyle has a greater potential effect on males in terms of acceptance of other cultures.

Gender studies have also looked at female experiences with repatriation (Collier, 2008) and identity formation (Walters, 2006). Collier found that support networks, were a critical component of the repatriation process for females. Walters discussed several

major themes that emerged from the female participant narratives, including spiritual formation and establishing independence.

In summary, third-culture students' experiences in the college setting have been measured primarily in terms of an all-inclusive group (i.e., third-culture students as a whole), by subpopulations (e.g., missionary, military), as well as smaller units of study (e.g., gender); however, the number and scope of these kinds of studies are limited. The current study extends this literature base by examining an uncharted area of study—possible differences between the subpopulations of third-culture students as they transition from their overseas host cultures to their first year of college in the United States.

## **THE FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE**

The first year of college is one of the most critical in terms of engaging students with the institution and retaining them in the second and third years (Astin, 1977, 1993; Bean, 1990; Matthews, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Research has shown that students who are socially integrated with peers and faculty are furthering their “social and intellectual integration” and are more likely to develop a stronger institutional commitment and persist (Tinto, p. 116). In response, educators have focused their efforts to helping first-year students persist by dedicating efforts to students' academic success, being more responsive to the diversity of the first-year population, and being guided by research and scholarship on the first year of college (Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005). Despite these efforts, Upcraft and colleagues reported that first-year students' academic success rates remain low.

Some of the challenges for first-year students stem from the developmental milestones they face during their first year of college (Skipper, 2005). Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors of student development is a model that illustrates how students adapt in the college environment—emotionally, socially, physically, and intellectually. The model focuses primarily on the formation of identity, which takes place throughout college (Evans, 1995). In the first year of college, students can encounter identity issues based on gender, sexual orientation, race, disability, and other factors which cause identity confusion. This is critical because identity confusion can lead to “great personal and academic dysfunction” (Upcraft et al., 2005, p. 8).

While challenges in the first year of college are not unique to any one population of students, third culture students are forming their identity based on a cultural lens for which little is known. The following section offers a discussion of culture and ethnic identity as it relates to third-culture students repatriating to their home country to attend college.

## **CULTURE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY**

### **Culture**

Useem, Useem, and Donoghue (1963) describe culture as the learned and shared behavior of a community of interacting human beings. Gudykunst and Kim (2003) define the sociological process of human communications through the following concepts: enculturation as “learning the culture,” acculturation as “the process of resocialization,” deculturization as “the unlearning of the original culture,” and assimilation as the “state of high deculturation of the original culture and acculturation of the new culture” (p. 4).

Weaver (1986) explains the layers of culture through the image of an iceberg (Figure 2). The surface culture is the part of the iceberg that is above the water and visible to others and easy to identify (e.g., language, behavior, customs, traditions). At this level of culture, others are primarily aware of cultural differences. However, there is a deeper level of culture that is below the surface and is often difficult to view or identify (e.g., beliefs, values, assumptions, thought processes).

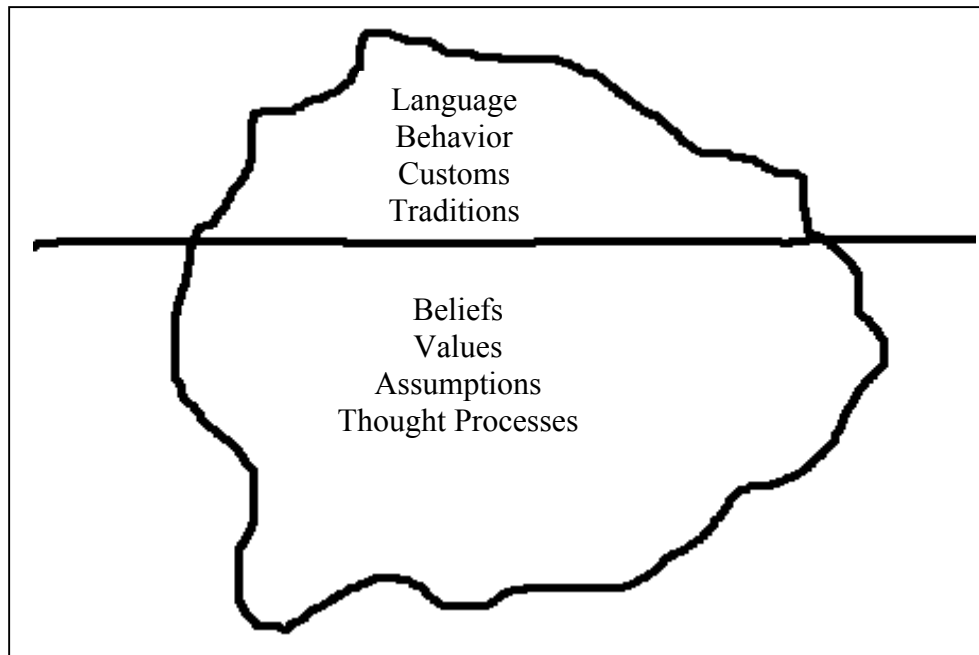


Figure 2. Cultural iceberg (Weaver, 1986).

***Culture shock and reverse culture shock.*** Moving from one culture to another can be a difficult process, and many individuals experience culture shock when moving to a new country or when moving back to their home country (reverse culture shock). Adler (1975) defines culture shock as:

a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture, to new cultural stimuli, which have little or no meaning, and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences. It may encompass feelings of helplessness, irritability, and fears of being cheated, contaminated, injured or disregarded. (p.13)

Gaw (1995) indicates that reverse culture shock is similar to culture shock but involves a process that “focuses on the difficulties of re-adapting and re-adjusting to one's own home culture after one has sojourned or lived in another cultural environment” (p. 85). Reverse culture shock is similar to the experience a person faces when entering a culture for the first time—the challenges faced when returning home are “less often anticipated and, perhaps because of that, more severe than those of leaving. While home may or may not have changed, the sojourner usually has, and readjustment can be difficult” (Fontaine, 1983, p. 173).

Culture clearly has a profound impact on individuals. In the following section, culture will be reviewed in terms of the manner in which it impacts ethnic identity.

## **Ethnic Identity**

Ethnic identity has been defined in myriad ways. Tajfel (1981) defined it as “that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 255). Torres (1996) states that ethnic identity development is based on what individuals learn about culture from their family and community. Others have indicated similar concepts by concluding that culture develops from “the shared

culture, religion, geography, and language of individuals who are often connected by strong loyalty and kinship” (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 79).

According to Phinney (1990), ethnic identity is measured by the attitudes and emotional significance individuals attach to their given social group. Betancourt and Regeser López (1993) indicate that the social group is often defined by the nationality or culture. While third-culture students’ ethnicity does not physically change as a result of growing up cross culturally, their shared culture, religion, geography, and language often do. Therefore, the ethnic identity development for third-culture students is a significant factor in their overall identity development. In reviewing the literature that informed the present study, models for ethnic identity development were considered because they revealed how individuals make sense of their own ethnicity and its role in their lives (Phinney, 1990).

Phinney’s model of ethnic identity development (1990) is based on Erickson’s theory of identity development (1968) and has three distinct stages: (a) *diffusion-foreclosure*, (b) *moratorium*, and (c) *identity achievement*. In the diffusion-foreclosure stage, individuals have not explored feelings and attitudes in regard to their own ethnicity. In this stage, a third-culture student living in a host country that has negative attitudes toward Americans may see it as a nonissue (diffusion) or could acquire the same attitudes (foreclosure). Students who have repatriated to the United States to attend college might also be at this stage of identity development. If the majority peer group has negative attitudes toward the host country—a culture they have adopted—the student may see it as a nonissue (diffusion) or could acquire the same attitudes (foreclosure).

During the moratorium stage, individuals become more aware of ethnic identity issues leading individuals to explore their ethnic background. Phinney and Ong (2007) indicate “exploration can involve a range of activities, such as reading and talking to people, learning cultural practices, and attending cultural events” (p. 272). The college environment provides a host of opportunities for third-culture students to explore their ethnic background (e.g., living in a residence hall, participating in class discussions, attending cultural events).

In the final stage of identity achievement, the individual acquires a healthy bicultural identity and is able to articulate how their different sets of cultural values, attitudes, and expectations fit together. Levenson (2009) indicates that bicultural identity development “requires a person to make sense of two different sets of cultural values, attitudes, and expectations they have internalized that are both vying for the same slot for cultural identity within the person’s overall identity” (p. 3). An example of this stage for third-culture students might be where they feel comfortable speaking on behalf of their host culture and do not feel the need to explain themselves to a faculty member or their country-of-origin peers. Simply, they are comfortable with a bicultural identity.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The current study explored the experiences of third-culture students navigating their way during their first year of college. Data were analyzed using Pollock and Van Reken’s (2001) four-category cultural domain taxonomy (i.e., foreigner, hidden immigrant, adopted, and mirror), which is based on physical and cognitive attributes

(e.g., looks alike/different<sup>2</sup>; thinks alike/different). Each of the four domains addresses the possible ways third-culture students relate to their host and home cultures (Figure 3). Individuals in the *foreigner* domain are different from students the host culture in physical appearance and in values, beliefs, and norms. *Hidden immigrant* individuals physically resemble those around them but differ in their values, beliefs, and norms. Individuals who look different than students in the host country but have lived there long enough to adopt the same world view and norms are in the *adopted* domain. Finally, in the *mirror* domain, third-culture students resemble peers in their host country and have the same values, beliefs, and norms.

<p><b>Foreigner</b></p> <p>Look different Think different</p>	<p><b>Hidden Immigrant</b></p> <p>Look alike Think different</p>
<p><b>Adopted</b></p> <p>Look different Think alike</p>	<p><b>Mirror</b></p> <p>Look alike Think alike</p>

*Figure 3.* Third-culture students' relationships to their surrounding cultures (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001)

Pollock and Van Reken's four domains served as the skeleton for the conceptual framework of this study, and the researcher built upon this framework to examine

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<sup>2</sup> Third-culture students' appearances were compared to the majority population of U.S. college and university students. According to the Almanac (2009), 67% of students attending four-year public institutions were White/non-Hispanic and 66% of students attending private four-year colleges were White/non-Hispanic.



variance in the experiences of differentness for the participants within each of the domains. This will be explained in greater detail in chapter three.

## **SUMMARY**

This chapter provided a review of the literature on third-culture students, including an overview of the general characteristics as well as research that focused on subpopulations such as military and missionary kids. Descriptions of first-year college students, including involvement and engagement variables, were presented as these are significant characteristics of the study.

Literature on culture and ethnic identity development was discussed, including ways these terms are defined by various researchers. Concepts such as culture shock and reverse culture shock were also introduced.

The final section of this chapter focused on the conceptual framework based on Pollock and Van Reken's (2001) cultural domains that describe the relationship between third-culture students and their surrounding culture. The next chapter of this dissertation study includes the methodology employed for the study. The rationale for qualitative methods is presented followed by an explanation of participant and site selections. The chapter also discusses the manner in which the researcher collected, coded, and analyzed the data. Assumptions that guided the study are offered along with limitations of the study including the method of selection for the participant and study sites and challenges in recruiting enough participants from the military subpopulation to include in the findings.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study is to provide an in-depth exploration of third-culture students' experiences adjusting to their first year of college in the United States, an area of study largely overlooked in higher education literature. Additionally, this study examined whether or not differences exist between the subpopulations of third-culture students.

The following chapter offers a comprehensive explanation of the researcher's method of investigation. In addition to the rationale for the use of qualitative methods, the researcher discusses participant selection procedures and data analysis. Detailed descriptions of the participant pool and study sites are also provided. The limitations of the study, including the ways the researcher addressed these limitations, conclude the chapter.

### **QUALITATIVE METHODS**

Qualitative methods were employed to explore third-culture students' transition experiences during the first year of college, providing thick, rich descriptions of these events. The researcher sought to (a) uncover a phenomenon about third-culture students adjusting to their first semester of college and (b) explore a deeper understanding of their perspectives of the home culture to which they had recently repatriated. Further, the first-year transitional experiences of third-culture students in terms of the process were

examined, rather than studying a specific relationship between variables in order to emphasize the “value-laden nature of inquiry...and seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 8). Finally, qualitative methods also provided an opportunity to observe differences among the subpopulations of third-culture students.

## **STUDY DESIGN**

Through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 26 students and two follow-up focus groups, third-culture students’ narratives were elicited regarding their experiences in their host cultures and during the first semester of college. These “participant perspectives” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) facilitated the exploration of the experiences of third-culture students on a deeper level than a survey would afford. Seidman (1998) indicates that “...the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 3). Furthermore, data from the follow-up focus groups were used to support what had been shared by individuals in a one-on-one setting. Morgan (1997) indicates that focus groups are intended to “supplement another primary method or combine with other qualitative methods in a true partnership” (p. 3). Additionally, the focus groups were a method used to triangulate the data. Creswell and Miller (2000) define triangulation as “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (p. 126). Therefore, the study was designed to ensure trustworthiness on a number of levels.

## **Participant Identification and Selection**

One challenge of finding participants for this study was that third-culture students are rarely identified through a college admission application process. Some colleges and universities track incoming third-culture students through the department of international student services; however, which students are third-culture often remains a guessing game for some administrators. For example, at one college contacted early in the study, the coordinator of international programs said in response to being asked how many third-culture students were newly enrolled for the fall 2009 semester, “I think we have seven third-culture students coming to campus.” When asked how the coordinator knew that, she said, “The students are listed as coming from another country but have American-sounding names.”

In selecting study participants, the researcher identified two organizations that serve as resources for third-culture students in post-secondary education: (a) Global Nomads, an organization that helps students attending colleges and universities in particular geographic regions connect with other local third-culture students; and (b) Mu Kappa International, a national fraternal organization serving and supporting students of missionaries. While these two organizations were beneficial in terms of identifying colleges and universities with known groups of third-culture students, there was no assurance that all third-culture students knew of or had connected with these voluntary networks on their campuses. Therefore, once site locations were chosen, gatekeepers were utilized at each of the institutions to recruit participants. The researcher also asked participants to identify other potential students who might be interested in the study. Desencombe (2007) indicates that a snowball effect is an “effective technique for

building up a reasonable-sized sample, especially when used for a small scale research project” (p. 18).

## **Site Selection**

The site selection process began by contacting Global Nomads and Mu Kappa International, as both organizations provided listings of colleges and universities that host their chapters. Since Mu Kappa International caters solely to students of missionary parents, site selection was focused in contacting the nine institutions listed on the Global Nomads web site in an effort to locate schools with more diversity among the third-culture students and to capture data from all four subpopulations. Also, the researcher found that students who participated in Global Nomads could be easily contacted through a campus listserv. E-mail and telephone contact with the nine identified colleges and universities revealed that only one institution—the first site selection, Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon—had a tracking system for all incoming third-culture students (i.e., the admission application included a section for students to self-identify their third-culture status and list their host country[ies]).

American University in Washington, D.C. was chosen as the second site for the study due to its location. Situated in the Northeast region and in the political and governmental hub of the nation, the school’s location provided a geographical point of comparison and a greater potential to capture narratives from students from diplomatic and international business families—subpopulations for which there is little to no research available.

Columbia International University in Columbia, South Carolina was the third site selected for the study because it was located in the Southeastern United States (i.e., a

different geographic comparison) and had an active campus Mu Kappa chapter. The researcher hypothesized that an institution where the majority of third-culture students are children of missionaries could provide a point of comparison to the other sites in the study.

The fourth site chosen was the University of South Carolina in Columbia, South Carolina. Since the first three sites were small, private schools, the University of South Carolina provided another point of comparison for the study representing a large, publically funded institution. Since there is no point-of-contact for third-culture students at the University, the researcher contacted a colleague to request that an e-mail invitation be forwarded to an e-mail listserve for students who had expressed interest in studying abroad. Approximately 15 students responded via e-mail or filled out the demographic survey; however only two students actually met the criteria and contributed to the findings. The researcher attributes this small number of participants to the study criteria which eliminated students who had only lived abroad when they were younger or were no overseas more than two years. Therefore, these data were included but were too limited to provide the intended large institution point of comparison.

### **Participant Criteria and Participation**

Criteria for participant selection included (a) being a first-time, first-year college student, (b) having American citizenship, and (c) spending at least two years abroad immediately prior (i.e., summer) to returning to the United States to attend college. This last requirement was critical to the study to control for differences in student experiences resulting from a longer reacclimation period.

***Approval for study.*** The researcher completed human subjects training during the summer 2009, and the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina officially approved the study on October 8, 2009 (Appendix A). Gatekeepers at each of the site locations were then contacted to determine requisite steps to conduct research on their respective campuses. A study profile was submitted to offices of research compliance at American University and Lewis and Clark College. While formal approval for study was not received at either of these institutions, gatekeepers were authorized to distribute a recruitment e-mail to students, and the researcher was welcomed on each of the campuses. At Columbia International University, approval for the study was given by the Office of the Dean who distributed a recruitment e-mail invitation to all first- and second-year students.

***Demographic survey.*** The recruitment e-mail included an active hyperlink to a demographic survey that was a web-based format (Appendix B). In the survey, participants were asked to indicate basic information about their overseas childhood experiences (e.g., age when they moved, length of time spent overseas, countries lived in, parents' occupations). The demographic survey was first designed and implemented by Klemens (2008) and adapted with permission of the author (Appendix C) for this study. The survey was written in clear and concise language and provided the advantage of being previously piloted. To generate interest in participation, inclusion in a drawing for a \$50 gift card to Barnes and Noble was offered as an incentive to students who completed the online questionnaire.

In the demographic survey, students were invited to report their

- Year in college, to establish first-time, first-year class status

- Age, to meet the minimum age requirement (18 years of age)
- Ethnicity, to help determine participants' physical resemblance to their host and home cultures
- Citizenship, to meet the American citizenship criteria
- Length of stay and countries lived in outside of the United States between the ages of 5-18, to determine which participants had lived abroad for at least two or more years and what countries hosted them
- Parents' occupations, to categorize students by subpopulation
- Date they returned to the United States, to confirm repatriation during the summer (June-August) prior to attending college
- Willingness to participate in an in-person interview about their experiences living abroad and during their first year of college

Among the four research sites, 92 students received the recruitment e-mail. The initial response rate was lower than expected; 40 students responded to the online demographic survey and only 21 met the criteria. The researcher decided to expand the first set of criteria and invited five sophomore students to reflect on their first-year experience. In a study that examined the experiences of second-year students at a private liberal arts college, Gansemer-Topf, Stern, and Benjamin (2007) interviewed both second- and third-year students for the study and found that both groups described their experiences similarly. Furthermore, Gansemer-Topf et al. reported third-year students had the benefit of hindsight.

***Participants.*** Twenty-six students who met the study criteria agreed to meet with the researcher for an in-person, one-on-one interview. Additionally, six of the



participants also attended follow-up focus group gatherings at American University and Lewis and Clark College. Seventeen of the participants were females; nine were males. Twenty-one were in their first semester of college; five were sophomores. The following subpopulations of third-culture students were identified in the study: 12 students whose parents worked in international business, seven students whose parents were in the government (i.e., diplomatic service), six students whose parents were missionaries, and one student from a military family stationed overseas (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1  
*Third-culture Student Subpopulations by Site Location (N = 26)*

Institution	Business	Government	Military	Missionary
American University	6	4	----	2
Columbia International University	-----	----	-----	4
Lewis & Clark College	5	2	1	---
University of South Carolina	2	-----	-----	----
Totals	13	6	1	6

***Study sites.*** The four study site locations represented the following geographical regions: (a) American University, Washington, DC, Northeastern United States.; (b) Columbia International University (CIU), Columbia, South Carolina, Southeastern United States; (c) Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon, Northwestern United States; (d) University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina, Southeastern United

States. In addition to geographic diversity, the institutions differed in size and type: (a) two of the institutions were private with less than 5,000 students (Lewis and Clark, CIU); (b) one site was a large, public research university (University of South Carolina); and (c) one site was a private religiously affiliated university (CIU).

*American University.* American University (AU) is a private, liberal arts university located in Washington, DC. During the fall 2009 semester, AU enrolled approximately 6,000 undergraduate students and over 5,000 graduate students—approximately 25 of these students were first-year, third-culture students. The University has the largest undergraduate program for international studies in the United States. American University students are noted for being highly politically active, taking advantage of the numerous opportunities to participate in the political environment of the nation's capital (American University web site, 2009).

*Columbia International University.* Columbia International University is a religiously affiliated, private higher education institution that awards both undergraduate and graduate degrees. With approximately 1,000 students on campus, it is recognized for its emphasis upon spiritual formation, biblical authority, and world evangelization. In August 2009, it was estimated that 20 of the new first-year students for the 2009-2010 academic year were third-culture students, with parents serving as overseas missionaries (Miriam Gerome, personal communication, July 26, 2009). One of the programs offered to these students through the Office of Student Life is Mu Kappa, which “serves and represents the needs of CIU’s MK (missionary kid) and TCK (third-culture kid) students” (CIU web site, 2009).

*Lewis and Clark College.* Lewis and Clark is private, four-year liberal arts college in Portland, Oregon. With a total undergraduate population of approximately 2,000 students, 540 were enrolled as first-year students during the 2008-2009 academic year. In fall 2009, Lewis and Clark enrolled 25 third-culture, first-year students who were American citizens. In a review of campus environments that are welcoming to third-culture students, Hernandez (2009) indicated that,

Lewis and Clark has one of the most robust [third-culture] programs in the United States. Over time, the College has been building a critical mass of [third-culture students], and it has experienced a 25 percent increase in their enrollment since 2001. (p. 8)

One of the cocurricular programs available to new third-culture students is the Lewis and Clark Intercultural Network for Connecting Students (LINCS), a peer-mentorship program, which focuses on helping incoming students from different cultural backgrounds adjust to college. The program centers around diversity, retention, and the success of first-year students.

*University of South Carolina.* The University of South Carolina Columbia campus is the flagship institution with more than 350 degree programs. In the fall of 2009, the University of South Carolina enrolled 20,521 students on the Columbia campus. Approximately 3,881 were first-time, first-year students. The University of South Carolina does not have any formal recruitment or retention efforts for third-culture students; however, the University offers an international business degree program as well as opportunities to study abroad (University of South Carolina web site, 2009).

## **DATA COLLECTION**

Upon completion of the demographic survey, each student participant received an e-mail from the researcher with an invitation to meet for an in-person interview on their respective campuses. Interviews were conducted at all four site locations between November 2, 2009 and December 9, 2009.

The interview protocol for this study (Appendix D) included broad questions that guided the interview (Riessman, 1993). Questions were open-ended and allowed participants to tell their stories. For example, the researcher invited participants to share about the different places they had lived growing up and followed up with questions such as, “What was it like making friends? What was it like learning a new culture?” Riessman indicates that it is useful to “ask questions that open up topics, and allow respondents to construct answers in ways they find meaningful” (p. 24-25). To this end, the interviews were designed to focus on past experiences, then the process of moving back to the United States, followed by questions about experiences during the first semester of college. In addition to addressing the research questions, the interview protocol also focused on Pollock and Van Reken’s (2001) cultural domains. For example, participants were asked to discuss whether they felt they were similar to or different from their country-of-origin peers.

Prior to each interview, the Participant Consent Form (Appendix E) was reviewed with each student clarifying the voluntary nature of participation in the study and providing assurances that personal identity would remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms in the findings. Participants were also informed that interviews would be recorded on a digital recorder. Finally, students were encouraged to share (openly and

honestly) about their experiences as first-year, third-culture students at their respective institutions.

In addition to the one-on-one interviews, the researcher recorded field notes and research memos to document perceptions during the interview process. The memos were used to recount the context and nuances from each interview. All interviews were transcribed, and the additional transcriptionist who assisted was given pseudonyms in order to protect participant anonymity.

The typed interview transcripts were e-mailed to each participant to review to ensure that accuracy and meaning had not been altered. No corrections were made to the original transcriptions. In addition, the first of the two focus groups was transcribed. Ambient noise in the café where the second focus group was held prevented an audible recording, so the researcher's notes were recorded in a memo from this event.

The 26 interview transcripts as well as the focus group transcript were imported into the NVIVO qualitative software program for analysis. Audio copies of each interview with accompanying typed transcripts were stored in individual files on a password protected computer. Tesch's (1990) recommended qualitative research strategy of reading every transcript in total prior to coding the interviews was employed to capture an overall sense of the narratives.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

An inductive approach (i.e., moving from specific to general observations) was used to allow patterns to surface from the data (i.e., resulting in five emergent themes presented in Chapter Four - Findings). In the initial phases of data analysis, an open coding process was utilized consisting of reading each transcript line by line and

assigning codes to words, phrases, and concepts. Creswell (1998) indicates that this application of open coding involves an investigation of the literal data. For instance, when a study participant said, “I talk and sound like an American, but I’d say within five or ten minutes of the conversation is when you realize I’m really not,” this line was coded as *non-American identity*. An example of coding a concept is illustrated in the following student statement, “They were talking about all these TV shows, and most of them were TV shows I have never heard of or ones that I don’t remember very well,” which was coded *behind in popular culture* (i.e., concept) rather than *did not know TV shows* (i.e., phrase).

A total of 27 codes (e.g., homesickness, language acquisition, difficulty making friends) were assigned. Throughout the coding process, a constant comparative analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) was employed, and the researcher went back and forth between what participants said and how the statement was interpreted. As the researcher continued to code the data, she returned to interviews coded early on to ensure the interpretations remained consistent with later transcripts.

## **Analysis of Cultural Domains**

The researcher designed a conceptual framework based on Pollock and Van Reken’s (2001) cultural domain taxonomy which represents third-culture students’ relationships to the dominant culture to analyze the data. Individuals in the foreigner domain are characterized as different from those around them, not only in appearance, but also in terms of norms, values, and beliefs. In the hidden immigrant domain, individuals physically resemble those around them, however their cultural lens and behavior is different than those in the dominant culture. Adopted domain individuals

look different than those in the host culture but have lived there long enough to have adopted the same norms, values, and beliefs. Finally, in the mirror domain, third-culture students resemble those in their host country and have lived there long enough to adopt the same world view and behaviors.

In analyzing the cultural domains, the researcher focused largely on the emergent theme Identity, which will be explained in greater detail in Chapter Four - Findings. At the crux of the cultural domain framework is how the individual identifies with their home culture in terms of (a) physical appearance and (b) identity. Physical resemblance was based on the race participants reported on the demographic survey in addition to observations from the in-person interviews. Identity was examined through students' reported feelings of their sense of fitting in or belonging to their home culture. Domains were categorized based on instances in the data when participants described feeling "different than their peers" or a "non-American identity."

***Varying levels of differentness.*** When analyzing the cultural domains, the researcher became aware that there were varying levels of the way students felt different from their home-culture peers. For some of the participants, it was immediately apparent which domain the person fit in, and these students often reflected a high degree of difference. Other participants started the interview saying they felt no different than their home-culture peers, however as the interviews progressed; there was evidence of differentness, although in some cases, only slight. Therefore, in order to deepen the understanding of the cultural domains, a spectrum of variance was developed in terms of differentness in the home culture (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2  
*Variance in Cultural Domains*

Low level of difference	Medium level of difference	High level of difference
Differences apparent, but did not seem to affect experience	Differences apparent, but only slightly affected experience	Differences apparent, seem to notably affect experience

## Supplemental Analyses

The researcher understood the domain analyses were largely subjective; therefore, steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. An outside reviewer was invited to examine six randomly selected interview transcripts and assign domains and levels of variance. Shenton (2004) suggests that peer scrutiny of the research project is essential for credibility:

The fresh perspective that such individuals may be able to bring may allow them to challenge assumptions made by the investigator, whose closeness to the project frequently inhibits his or her ability to view it with real detachment. Questions and observations may well enable the researcher to refine his or her methods, develop a greater explanation of the research design and strengthen his or her arguments in the light of the comments made. (p. 67)

The outside reviewer studied the conceptual framework as well as the methodology chapter of this study prior to completing analyses. The researcher and reviewer discussed the outcomes and compared findings for the six interviews and agreed on all of the cultural domain assignments and five out of the six levels of variance. In the interview resulting in different variance levels (i.e., medium vs. high), the researcher had



additional data from focus group transcripts and notes that were not available to the reviewer and provided a more complete profile (see Chapter 4 – Findings).

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Prior to the study, the researcher spent time getting to know third-culture students on a personal basis at two different institutions. As a result, when the present study was designed and interview protocol was developed, the researcher recognized that recent attention to past experiences may have highlighted those experiences more profoundly than they merited, potentially limiting the study.

To recruit the participants for this study, institutions were chosen that indicated they (a) tracked incoming third-culture students or (b) had support organizations (e.g., Global Nomads, Mu Kappa) that were active on their campuses. The researcher believed this strategy would provide the best opportunity to recruit the largest number of participants from each institution. This technique was also efficient in terms of timing, requiring working with a smaller number of gatekeepers at each institution. While these strategies proved to be beneficial for the study, they also potentially limited the outcomes. Because students were connected to a department on campus (i.e., international student services) that knew who they were and invited them to attend international student orientation, study participants were likely to have a different experience than students on college campuses where there are no systems of support. While the researcher did not realize this implication during the site selection process, outcomes of the study had merit nonetheless. Further study in this area should include institutions that do not have supports for third-culture students to serve as a point of comparison and to validate findings.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) indicate that a good qualitative study “acknowledges the limitations of generalizability” (p. 207). While the study covered three different geographical regions of the United States as well as different types of institutions, it was not representative of all locals and institutional types (i.e., missing representatives from the Midwest and Northeast as well as significant representation from public research institutions and community colleges). While the present study may not be generalizeable for all third-culture students, the research will be able to assist the readers “in seeing the potential transferability of findings” (Marshall & Rossman, p. 207)

This snapshot study captured the experiences of first-year, third-culture students at a critical point in their college experience but did not provide a longitudinal viewpoint with repeated observations collected over a long period of time. An additional limitation was that participants had completely different experiences in different parts of the world where levels of immersion varied. These were not variables the researcher could control; however, these aspects were addressed in the findings whenever possible because they helped create a backdrop for participant responses. The researcher attempted to maintain consistency whenever possible, while recognizing that some of limitations could not be changed.

Finally, since the criteria for the study included only students who were overseas for two or more years and directly repatriated to the United States the summer prior to starting college, this narrowed the pool of participants. For example, only one of the five students from military families, who completed the online demographic survey, met the criteria of the study. This subpopulation could not be compared against the others because of a lack of substantial data. Conversely, the researcher was able to collect a

reasonable-sized sample of the two subpopulations lacking the most research (i.e., business and government).

## **SUMMARY**

The methodology chapter offered a comprehensive rationale for the researcher's method of investigation for this study. In addition to the rationale for the use of qualitative methods, participant selection procedures and data analysis were discussed. Detailed descriptions of the participants and study sites were also provided. The limitations of the study were presented, and the researcher offered methods for addressing these limitations.

Chapter four presents the findings of the study and is organized into three major sections that include a summary of participants' demographic characteristics, participants' descriptions of themselves categorized according to Pollock and Van Rekens's (2001) taxonomy, and a presentation of participants' narrative data which were reduced to a small number of themes.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

This dissertation study explored the experiences of third-culture students transitioning in their first year of college. Data were collected from student narratives based on an interview protocol that addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the transition experiences of third-culture students in their first year of college?
2. In what ways, if any, do the experiences of subpopulations vary from group to group?
3. What physical and attitudinal attributes differentiate third-culture students along a spectrum of variance?

The findings of this study address the research questions according to three major sections. Using responses to a demographic survey, the first section provides an overview of participant characteristics, including gender, ethnicity, and parental occupation. This section provides a context for the first research question by indicating who the participants are in terms of the duration of time overseas. The second section includes an overview of participants' cultural domains (i.e., their relationships to their host and home cultures) and discusses how the researcher employed Pollock and Van Reken's (2001) cultural framework to identify and categorize this relationship. In the final section of the findings, five major themes (i.e., Identity, Relationship with Peers,

Culture Shock, Support, and Home) are presented with a discussion of their frequency and relevance among the different subpopulations of third-culture students.

Data were gathered from an online survey, 26 one-on-one interviews with students attending four institutions across the United States (i.e., American University, Columbia International University, Lewis and Clark College, and the University of South Carolina), and two follow-up focus groups. The following findings emerged from an analysis of the data collected from each of the site locations.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

Responses to an online, demographical survey indicated that the 26 participants represented the four subpopulations of third-culture students as follows: business (n = 13), government (n = 6), military (n = 1), and missionary (n = 6). The number of students from military families was small because participants interested in the study did not meet the criteria set forth by the researcher (i.e., had not lived overseas for two or more years or did not directly repatriate to the United States the summer prior to attending college). Interview data from the sole student from a military family were used in the analysis leading to the overall emergent themes but were not used in subpopulation comparisons. Students whose parents were in international business included corporate business workers (e.g., oil executives), volunteers (e.g., Save the Children), and international school teachers. Government workers included students whose parents were a part of the U.S. Department of State (i.e., diplomats). Additional demographic variables, such as gender and ethnicity are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1  
*Participant Demographics by Institution (N = 26)*

	American University (n = 12)	Lewis and Clark College (n = 8)	Columbia International University (n = 4)	University of South Carolina (n = 2)	Total
Male	4	3	2	---	9
Female	8	5	2	2	17
Caucasian	8	9	3	2	21
Black/African	1	---	---	---	1
American					
Asian	2	---	---	---	2
American					
Hispanic	---	---	1	---	1
Arab	1	---	---	---	1
American					
Business	6	5	---	2	13
Government	4	2	---	---	6
Military	---	1	---	---	1
Missionary	2	---	4	---	6

Participants had lived in countries around the world: Middle Eastern countries (e.g., Egypt, Jordan, Turkey), European countries (e.g., France, Scotland, Switzerland), African countries (e.g., Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya), South American countries (e.g., Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay), and Asian countries (Bhutan, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore). Since nine of the participants had lived in four or more countries (see Table 4.2) prior to attending college, it was not feasible to uniformly evaluate their experiences based on where they had lived geographically. Therefore, this variable was used as a point of reference in the discussion of the findings, but was not used for comparison among subpopulations.

Table 4.2

*Geographic Diversity of Third-Culture Student Subpopulations (N = 26)*

<b>Participant n = 26</b>	<b>Host Cultures (Years)</b>	<b>Total Years Abroad</b>	<b>Subpopulation</b>
Bill	Beijing (3)	3	Business
Brent	Scotland (5)	5	Business
Ellen	Beijing (2) Ecuador (7) Kenya (6) Abu Dhabi (3)	18	Business
Hannah	Switzerland (4)	4	Business
Ian	Jordan (6)	6	Business
Katherine	Indonesia (3) Thailand (2) Philippines (9) Indonesia (3)	18	Business
Kendra	Qatar (3)	3	Business
Kimberly	Australia (2) New Zealand (1) Singapore (7)	10	Business
Myra	Philippines (7) Chile (2) Egypt (4) India (5)	18	Business
Melissa	Russia (4) Switzerland (11)	15	Business
Paul	France (9)	9	Business
Richard	Japan (18)	18	Business
Shelly	Israel (10)	10	Business
Anna	Paraguay (2) Costa Rica (2) France (2) Panama (3)	9	Government

Allison	Paraguay (2) Costa Rica (2) France (2) Panama (3)	9	Government
Cindy	Ethiopia (3) Taiwan (2) Uganda (1) South Africa (3) Japan (2)	11	Government
Megan	Saudi Arabia (1) Egypt (3) India (2)	6	Government
Robert	Mali (2) Madagascar (2) Egypt (4) England (1) Egypt (5)	14	Government
Saranya	India (1) Bhutan (2) Russia (2) Myanmar (2) India (1) Egypt (2)	11	Government
Amy	Turkey (15)	15	Missionary
Leah	Scotland (8) Portugal (1) Angola (4) Kenya (4)	17	Missionary
Rachael	Brazil (10)	10	Missionary
Simon	Nicaragua (15)	15	Missionary
Tammy	Congo (3) Kenya (12)	15	Missionary
Will	France (1) Chad (5)	6	Missionary
Jillian	Germany (4)	4	Military

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## CULTURAL DOMAINS

Hiebert (1983) indicates that the members of a cultural group share a system of assumptions, beliefs, and values; these components are a framework through which individuals interpret and make sense of life and the world around them. Pollock and Van Reken (2001) identified four domains that describe the ways third-culture students relate to their surrounding culture: (a) foreigner domain—participants physically look different and possess different values, beliefs, and norms; (b) hidden immigrant domain—students physically look similar to their peers but possess different cultural values, beliefs, or norms; (c) adopted domain—individuals look different, but have adopted the same values, beliefs, and norms; and (d) mirror domain—similar in appearance to American peers and possess the same values, beliefs, and norms.

Participants' physical sameness to or difference from their host and home countries was determined according to the ethnicities listed on the demographic survey—compared to the majority Caucasian population—and through physical observations of the researcher during the in-person interviews. Cognitive attributes (e.g., values, beliefs, norms) of the domain categories were examined through the students' narratives in terms of whether they reflected sameness or difference from their home-country peers. For example, one participant, in describing her feelings on what being an American meant to her responded, "I think people for a long time will assume that I am [an American]...I would never fight for America. I would never work on a presidential campaign. I would never fly an American flag. I really don't identify with that."

Based on these analyses, the majority of participants ( $n = 22$ ) fell into the hidden immigrant domain; four were in the foreign category; and no student was identified as

either adopted or mirror. Variance emerged, particularly for the hidden immigrants, in the ways participants related to their home cultures and the affect it had on their experiences. Table 4.3 depicts the students and their home-culture domains and level of variance, which is explained in greater detail in the following the analysis of the cultural domains.

Table 4.3  
*Participant Home Culture Domains and Variance*

	<b>Participant</b> n = 26	<b>Home culture</b>	<b>Variance</b>	<b>Subpopulation</b>
1	Amy	Hidden Immigrant	High	Missionary
2	Anna	Hidden Immigrant	Low	Government
3	Allison	Hidden Immigrant	Low	Government
4	Bill	Hidden Immigrant	Low	Business
5	Brent	Hidden Immigrant	High	Business
6	Cindy	Hidden Immigrant	High	Government
7	Ellen	Hidden Immigrant	Medium	Business
8	Hannah	Hidden Immigrant	Low	Business
9	Ian	Foreigner	High	Business
10	Jillian	Hidden Immigrant	Low	Military
11	Katherine	Hidden Immigrant	Medium	Business
12	Kendra	Hidden Immigrant	Medium	Business
13	Kimberly	Hidden Immigrant	High	Business
14	Leah	Hidden Immigrant	High	Missionary
15	Myra	Hidden Immigrant	Low	Business
16	Megan	Hidden Immigrant	Low	Government
17	Melissa	Hidden Immigrant	Low	Business
18	Paul	Hidden Immigrant	Low	Business
19	Rachael	Hidden Immigrant	Medium	Missionary
20	Richard	Foreigner	Medium	Business
21	Robert	Hidden Immigrant	Medium	Government
22	Saranya	Foreigner	Low	Government
23	Simon	Foreigner	High	Missionary
24	Shelly	Hidden Immigrant	High	Business
25	Tammy	Hidden Immigrant	Low	Missionary
26	Will	Hidden Immigrant	High	Missionary

*Note.* All names are pseudonyms.

### **Hidden Immigrant Domain**

In the hidden immigrant domain, 12 students were categorized as having a low level of differentness in terms of feeling dissimilar to their peers or not identifying with the majority American culture. For example, Tammy (hidden immigrant, low variance, missionary subpopulation), who had lived in Kenya, explained early in her interview that feeling different from her American peers was a nonissue for her. She said, “Sometimes

I felt like they don't understand what it's like to have lived in another country...but, it's not been a really big deal for me.” Later in the interview she discussed feeling different from her American peers in terms of having less material goods and again noted that this difference did not bother her.

Six participants fell into the middle of the spectrum. These students indicated that their cultural customs were different than their country-of-origin peers. While these customs made them feel “weird” or “frustrated,” this did not seem to affect their ability to relate to their peers or make friends. For example, Robert (hidden immigrant, medium variance, government subpopulation) talked about how he felt behind in popular culture in the United States. He said that people made references about television actors that went straight over his head. Frustration was evident in his tone; however, this did not seem to affect his experience. Minutes after he shared the frustrations of being behind in the popular culture, he talked about how he appreciated having a diverse group of friends on campus.

Finally, nine of the students were on the higher end of the spectrum in terms of their reported feeling of difference from their home-country peers. A remark made by Cindy (hidden immigrant, high variance, government subpopulation) early in her interview illustrates, “When I came here...I couldn't relate to most Americans.” This statement, combined with other comments about difficulties fitting in, placed her on the higher end of differentness.

## **Foreigner Domain**

Four participants in this study were classified in the foreigner domain. These students were American citizens but looked different from the majority of their Caucasian home-culture peers in terms of race/ethnicity (e.g., Asian American, Arab American). Similar to the participants in the hidden immigrant domain, variation existed among the feelings of differentness for those in the foreigner domain. For instance, on the higher end of the spectrum, Ian (foreigner, high variance, business subpopulation) described times when he felt subject to discrimination based on his Middle Eastern physical characteristics and name. He discussed his fears of having a professor discriminate against him based on the fact that he looked like he was from the Middle East, despite having spent the majority of his life living outside of Chicago, Illinois. In response to his relationships with faculty, Ian responded, “I felt like it took my professors a while to respect my opinion.” Later in the interview, when asked if he had experienced overt racism since coming to college, he shared a story from the week before the interview when he was giving a campus tour to prospective students. He said the father of one of the students would not look him in the eyes when he was speaking. Ian explained, “His eyes would just wander away. He wouldn’t give me eye contact.” The challenges Ian faced appeared to make his transition to college more difficult.

Richard (foreigner, medium variance, business subpopulation), who was Asian American and had lived in Japan before coming to the United States, had a similar experience. He shared a story about disagreeing with students in his class about an issue related to Asian society, and in response to his differing opinion, a classmate replied,

“Oh, you’re just playing your citizen card.” When asked how it felt to have that remark thrown at him, he responded with “Insulting.” Richard also mentioned that this was an isolated incident for him, and the overall trend in his narrative place him at a medium level of variance.

The next section provides additional examples of how students related to their home culture. The five major emergent themes (i.e., Identity, Relationship With Peers, Culture Shock, Support, and Home) address the primary research question for the present study: What are the transition experiences of third-culture students in their first year of college?

## **MAJOR EMERGENT THEMES**

Using an inductive coding process, the researcher first identified 27 codes in the data, which were narrowed down to five major emergent themes with 10 minor themes. While the majority of the 27 codes fit into one of the 10 minor themes, four outlying codes did not fit into any of the themes. Two of the four outlying codes (i.e., Fear of Safety in the Host Culture and Moving Abroad after College) addressed students’ past or future experiences rather than their current experiences. The third code (i.e., Learning From Friends), with a low frequency of two instances, focused on the experiences of people other than the participant. Finally, the fourth code (i.e., Socially Elite) had three instances but did not seem to fit within any of the major or minor themes. These data remained coded but were not used in the present findings.

Table 4.4 depicts the five major themes that emerged from the data including the frequencies and a list of the participants. Each major theme is supported by examples of student responses that describe their experiences in the first year of college. Following

the themes is a summary of the frequencies among the subpopulations of third-culture students.

Table 4.4  
*Overall Emergent Themes*

Themes	Examples of Codes	Frequency	Participants
Identity	Non-American identity, Feels different than peers	26	ALL
Relationships With Peers	Connecting with internationals, Difficulty making friends	14	1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 24, 26
Culture shock	Behind in pop culture, Alcoholic restrictions	13	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 21, 24
Support	Support from family and third-culture students, Connecting with faculty and staff	12	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24
Home	Homesickness, Difficulty explaining home to peers	12	3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 21, 23

## **Identity**

In the participant interviews, the concept of identity was discussed more than any other theme describing how the students related to their culture and country-of-origin peers in college. In terms of their home-culture identity, all 26 participants expressed that they either (a) felt different from their American peers or (b) did not identify as an American even though they were citizens of and currently living in the United States. Table 4.5 depicts which students mentioned these concepts during their interviews or in



the focus groups. Examples of narratives as well as the subpopulation and level of variance follow the table.

Table 4.5

*Themes Related to Identity*

Themes	Number of Participants	Participant ID
Non-American identity	26	ALL
Feels different from peers	15	1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 16, 17, 18, 20, 24, 26

***Non-American Identity.*** Students described their identity with their host and home cultures in terms of not fully relating to the American culture or not relating to the American culture at all. For instance, Leah (hidden immigrant, high variance, missionary subpopulation), whose parents are missionaries, shared about her struggle to identify with any culture (i.e., American or foreign):

I have a really hard time pinpointing a culture to identify the most with because I haven't spent an overwhelming majority of my life in one place. I'm really not Scottish even though I was born there and lived there for eight years. I'm obviously not African. I mean I talk and sound like an American, but I'd say within five or ten minutes of the conversation is when you realize I'm really not. I mean, I'm not patriotic in any way or form...So, yeah, I really don't have a culture that I claim...I don't think I could ever say that I'm African...I've never had to live like most Africans do, and I've never been oppressed like they have. If I move back to Scotland one day, I don't know if I'll ever be able to really say I'm Scottish either.

Later in her interview she mentioned how her Kenyan cultural background influenced her way of thinking: “You just get so caught up in your life here and forget about where you came from and forget about the millions of hungry people you used to live amongst.” Not only did she comment on the degree to which her host culture has affected her, but she also noted how important it was to stay grounded in her Kenyan values and beliefs: “When I first arrived, I had a very large world view and world perspective...and I’m trying to get back on track with that.”

Other participants talked about their identity in terms of how they felt caught between cultures. For some, like Will (hidden immigrant, high variance, missionary subpopulation), this even caused them to feel alienated from their home-culture peers:

I feel like with the other TCKs, we can understand each other in going back and forth. Whereas with other Americans who haven’t been outside of the country, I don’t feel like they understand me as well as they understand others who are more like them. Because when I am with them, I am showing them my American side, and if I show them my Chadian side, that’s a little strange and it alienates me a little more.

Myra (hidden immigrant, low variance, business subpopulation) shared a similar sentiment. While she mentioned not fully relating to the American culture, the effects were not as great in terms of her college experience:

I’m not really any one culture just because I’ve been going through this whole mix of cultures all my life. I guess I’ve been raised as an American, but it would be a wider view than anyone here just because I have all these other influences.

So, the way I view the world—I'm an American citizen, but it's just I'm more liberal and more predisposed to international things I guess.

Paul's (hidden immigrant, low variance, business subpopulation) remarks demonstrate how some students felt they represented more of a blend of cultures.

I don't feel like I've ever particularly been French or particularly American. I'd like to say I've coined the term," Ameripean." I've grown up with so many different cultures from so many different places while living in France, but also still sort of experiencing America. I don't know—I'm such a mix. I really don't identify with either one or the other.

Bill (hidden immigrant, low variance, business subpopulation), on the other hand, reflected on his identity from the perspective of how his peers perceived him:

Growing up abroad at least once in your life, you're very much aware of how American you are. But at the same time, you're more aware of other cultures too.

The international kids here tell me that I don't seem like an American kid to them. Kimberly (hidden immigrant, high variance, business subpopulation) was another participant who also recognized that her peers saw her in a different way than she viewed herself:

I think people don't know what to expect. Like, in their mind you're either American or you're not. My passport says I'm American, but I have never felt American. So, I kind of fall through the cracks in people's expectations I guess. They don't have a set box to put me in.

***Feels Different From Peers.*** The majority of participants were in the hidden immigrant domain (i.e., looks similar to peers but thinks differently). Cindy (hidden immigrant, high variance, diplomat subpopulation) was uncomfortable with her American peers and sought out friendships with internationals who shared the experience of living overseas before coming to college. She had this to say about her discomfort:

When I came here I said, “I want to be part of the American culture and learn because I’m an American too.” But then when I came here—just like in conversations—it was really weird. I couldn’t relate to most Americans. So, I just started to talk more to international people and we related more because of the experiences we’ve had. Like developing countries—it’s just so different than living here. I don’t know, I just related more to people who lived abroad than people who have never been away.

Another student, Katherine (hidden immigrant, medium variance, business subpopulation), shared about her differentness as a minority. She recognized that she felt this way in class but not necessarily all areas such as the residence hall where she lived among international and other third-culture students:

In high school, all of us were third-culture kids so we were all like, “Oh yeah, that’s no big deal.” But, when you come here—and there are third-culture kids, but then they’re not going to be in all your classes. So, you could be the only one who’s like been out of the country in your class.

Other students felt different because they did not fit in with American cultural norms. Brent (hidden immigrant, high variance, business subpopulation) mentioned how not having his driver's license and always needing to explain that to others frustrated him:

I'm always having to go over the same stories [with my American peers]. I still don't know how to drive; I still don't know how to drive, telling a hundred different people I don't know how to drive. That's annoying.

In some cases, the students' differentness was pointed out by their American peers, as illustrated in Melissa's (hidden immigrant, low variance, business subpopulation) and Katherine's (hidden immigrant, medium variance, business subpopulation) stories:

The first night I went out was awkward. We went to Johnny Rockets and I got a grilled cheese because I was jet lagged...I opened my wallet and all I had left was \$100 bill that my dad had given me, because that's all he gets from the bank over there. They don't give \$20's, and \$5's and \$1's or whatever. Then I had to pay for a \$4 grilled cheese, and I like whip out this \$100 bill, and [my roommates] are just like, "What are you?" I didn't know \$100's were weird. (Melissa)

In the Philippines, you never pick up your laundry with your hands. If your laundry is on the floor, you pick it up with your feet, and the first time I did that my roommate was like, "That is so weird. Why are you using your toes for your fingers?" (Katherine)

Amy (hidden immigrant, high variance, missionary subpopulation) also shared an experience where she was considered different because of cultural norms and commented on how this affected her independence:

In Turkey I had a lot of independence from my family because I could take public transportation and I knew the culture really well and then coming here not knowing it, and like not being able to drive, I lost a lot of my independence because I didn't know how to function in American culture.

Feeling different motivated Rachael (hidden immigrant, medium variance, missionary subpopulation) and Katherine (hidden immigrant, medium variance, business subpopulation) to change their behaviors to blend into the home culture:

I'll be like a chameleon. Like, my Brazilian friend, I'll go up and give her a hug, yell something in Portuguese, give her a kiss on the cheek. Whereas with Americans, I'll just do the American thing. (Rachael)

It's kind of hard because I feel like I have a dual personality. I can kind of turn on one when I'm with this set of people and I can turn on a different one when I'm with that. Like, with my Filipino friends, it's kind of like we have the language commonality, which is nice to talk in my mother tongue. I mean, with the Americans it's also nice because I'm learning about their culture and about how American girls do things and how American boys do things. I learn from both. (Katherine)

## **Relationship With Peers**

Forming peer relationships on campus was examined from two different perspectives: (a) through the difficulties making friends and (b) through the connection to internationals on campus.

Table 4.6  
*Themes Related to Relationships With Peers*

Themes	Frequency	Participants
Connecting with internationals	12	2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 26
Difficulty making friends	9	1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 13, 15, 24, 26

***Connecting With Internationals.*** Students at all four institutions indicated that connecting with international students helped their transition to college. Kimberly (hidden immigrant, high variance, business subpopulation), who attends the University of South Carolina said, “It’s a great international community here. My roommates—I have two roommates from Puerto Rico actually, and I see Asian people around campus all the time, which makes me feel at home.” Hannah (hidden immigrant, low variance, business subpopulation) and Will (hidden immigrant, high variance, missionary subpopulation) from Lewis and Clark College and Columbia International University, respectively, expressed similar sentiments about connecting with internationals:

I met two French guys here, like half French, half American guys that I hang out with a lot. Like, I just enjoy speaking French. It makes me feel like—it makes me feel good and stuff. They’re fun. They’re like the kind of people I’m used to kind of, because it’s just different. It’s just nice hanging out with them. (Hannah)

I have other friends who are TCKs—one lived in Cameroon and the other lived in Niger, so we get together and talk about stuff that happened in Niger. We greet each other in French or Arabic and we dress up in African clothes and do African

stuff together. So, I feel like I go back to my Chadianess. And I think the other TCKs, we enjoy being our other culture while we're here together. (Will)

Participants offered specifics about the ways connecting with international and other third-culture students were helpful in terms of their transition. Leah (hidden immigrant, high variance, missionary subpopulation) had this observation:

It's a different atmosphere when you're with international students. It feels a lot less judgmental. Nobody asks you like where you're from, where have you lived before and stuff like that. I'd say it's a lot closer of a community than others.

Richard (hidden immigrant, medium variance, business subpopulation) shared his thoughts on living in the international student residence hall:

It's really nice...you realize that you need those people around you to help you out with things. Like, "Oh wow, I'm kind of homesick," and, "Hey, you've been through that too," It's like, "Let's talk." There's a lot of the attachment of reminiscing about being in Japan, talking about the food and the people and the cities. You become even more homesick, but it's really nice to be able to talk about that and get it off your chest.

***Difficulty Making Friends.*** While living in an international residence hall and meeting other students who spoke the same language was helpful for some students, there were still some who voiced difficulty making friends when they arrived on campus. Will (hidden immigrant, high variance, missionary subpopulation) said, "The thing I found was most difficult at first was that people didn't really—I would talk about my



experiences overseas and people didn't really seem to care." Kimberly (hidden immigrant, high variance, business subpopulation), Anna (hidden immigrant, low variance, government subpopulation), and Shelly (hidden immigrant, high variance, business subpopulation) felt the same way:

When I talked about like my experiences [living overseas], I felt like they couldn't relate to it. I felt like I was just talking about something that they weren't interested in at all. I guess the hardest thing is that people were close-minded and weren't interested in learning about the world outside of their little life, their little area of where they'd been. Even if they were from different states or something, like living in other countries hadn't even occurred to them.

(Kimberly)

I feel like outside of where I live [in the international residence hall], it's definitely harder to make friends just because—I don't know. I don't want to say it's just like an international student thing to accept people, but I mean, whenever like I traveled overseas, the schools were so used to having students come and go because of the embassy or the press companies or whatever, that they agreed to like make new friends every year. Whereas from what I've gathered from a lot of students here, they've gone to the same schools so they maybe started from kindergarten, so I guess it's kind of harder to make friends. I try to talk to a few people, and I try to get along with them. But, I had this one guy that I thought was an American guy that I thought I was doing like really well with and getting to know, and he lived in England. That was a surprise. Well, I thought I had kind

of made progress, but I'm still working on it. I'm still trying. I'm hesitant to go out with a lot of them just because I don't know what they're like, I guess, outside of the classroom just especially, I guess, the going out and drinking issue. I'd rather not just be around people who are going to get really drunk and really sick. I mean, that ruins my night...Maybe I need to just work a little bit harder. (Anna)

Moving here—more culture shock because I was around teenagers, and I'd never really learned how to be social around American teenagers, so that was really hard on me. It's still very hard on me. Yeah, it's interesting because like people would sort of expect like the international kids to not be as good at being social, but because I'm not exactly an international kid, they expect me to be good at being social with them. (Shelly)

## **Culture Shock**

Two minor themes emerged from the parent theme of Culture Shock: (a) alcohol restrictions and (b) behind in popular culture. Students discussed the surprise of not being permitted to drink alcohol legally as a teenager and the American attitude toward drinking. Participants also mentioned what it felt like to be behind on popular culture and how it even affected their experience returning to the United States.

Table 4.7  
*Themes Related to Culture Shock*

Themes	Frequency	Participants
Alcohol restrictions	9	2, 3, 5, 8, 10, 13, 17, 18, 24
Behind in popular culture	9	1, 4, 5, 10, 13, 14, 16, 21, 24

***Alcohol Restrictions.*** Approximately one third of the students discussed how alcohol restrictions in the United States were reverse culture shock experiences in the first semester of college. Many of these students had been drinking legally for several years, and it had become a cultural norm in their lives overseas. Paul (hidden immigrant, low variance, business subpopulation) said, “For nine years, I’ve come to appreciate a glass of red wine with dinner. It’s just weird not being able to order it.” Brent (hidden immigrant, high variance, business subpopulation) also discussed his feelings about not being able to drink legally in the United States:

For the past couple of months, I find it very odd that I can’t go to a bar at the end of the week, because in Scotland that’s what we would do. If you had a long day or any one of my friends had a long day, we would all go to the bar. There was one right next to the school. We’d have a beer and then we’d all go home. We were never getting drunk or being immature or drinking excessively, but that’s just how we ended every single week or every bad day.

Others talked about their frustrations with the way American students consumed alcohol. For instance, when talking about her peers, Jillian (hidden immigrant, low variance, military subpopulation) said, “I just think that people take [drinking] a little out of proportion, almost to the extreme. And it gets kind of irritating. It always ends up terribly, so there’s no point.” Anna (hidden immigrant, low variance, government subpopulation) and Melissa (hidden immigrant, low variance, business subpopulation) voiced similar frustrations and discussed how the attitudes toward drinking in college in the United States were different from their host cultures:

In Panama, we had access to alcohol, but I mean, no one got completely drunk. No one ever had to go to a hospital or anything like that. People grow up learning how to drink in relative moderation. But then I came here and, I mean, at Welcome Week every night there was like 10 or so students being transported [to the hospital intoxicated]. It’s gotten better throughout the school year, but I guess people learn they don’t really want to go back to the hospital. But, the first week it was really crazy. I did not like it at all. I ended up going to my mom’s [home in Washington, DC] just because the residence halls were just awful, people screaming and really drunk. I was like, “I can’t handle this my first week. This is way too much.” (Anna)

I hate frat parties because I grew up with the ability to go out to a bar when I was 16. So, I’ve been drinking for so much longer. I went through the phase where I’d just want to get drunk and crazy when I was 16 years old. Kids are just getting into it now, and I’m like, “I don’t want to deal with you.” During welcome

week I didn't go out because I just saw the stupidity of the girls especially. And I'm like, "No I'm staying in. I can't deal with that." (Melissa)

Kimberly (hidden immigrant, high variance, business subpopulation) also experienced a sense of unease and culture shock with the drinking behavior of her American peers in contrast with the attitude towards alcohol in her host country of Singapore, but from a different perspective compared to other study participants:

My roommates had alcohol in the room all the time, which freaked me out because I was very sheltered in Singapore. There is very little crime there. There is—you know, you get the death penalty for drugs. It's very strict, very severe, and as well, it's very safe, very clean, and a very nice place to live. Then coming back, it's "Where did all the rules go? Where's all the structure in the States?"

***Behind in Popular Culture.*** Students recognized that they were behind their peers as far as understanding pop culture references (e.g., popular movies, music). Some also stated that this made it difficult to connect with their fellow students during the first semester of college. For example, Jillian (hidden immigrant, low variance, military subpopulation) said, "It's kind of hard to connect because I haven't been here. I don't really know the popular culture...I'm kind of behind, I guess, on the top movies, the music." Robert (hidden immigrant, medium variance, government subpopulation) and Kimberly (hidden immigrant, high variance, business subpopulation) added to this sentiment:

People will talk about some social references that I won't get, you know, because I didn't grow up here, like a certain actor...I mean, we have cable TV. We watch

stuff. The movies come out in Egypt. But, there's little social references that every once in a while just go straight over your head. (Robert)

I felt like I was kind of at a disadvantage because all the culture references that they knew, I didn't know. Like, a lot of the movies that people had watched were never released in Singapore, or banned, because of censorship. So, there wasn't a lot to talk to about. (Kimberly)

Leah (hidden immigrant, high variance, missionary subpopulation) shared about cultures she had never been exposed to before coming back to the United States:

There's definitely like a couple of cultures here that I've never been exposed to, like the gay community and the Jewish community. I mean, like every country I lived in, not one of those were present. It particularly took me a little while to get used to that, like Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah rolled around, and I'd never even really heard of it. I had no idea what was going on. I had no idea like what the rainbow flag meant and all that kind of stuff, and I saw them on like every other person's door. I was like, "What's going on?" It's weird to think that after living in such different places that you still come back to like technically your home country and discover new cultures.

Shelly (hidden immigrant, high variance, business subpopulation) commented on not being able to understand popular cultural references when she moved to Israel as a child, and then again as a young adult in her first semester of college in the United States:

I was accepted with open arms [in Israel], but I was still a foreigner. So, there was still some slang that I didn't understand or pop culture references that people

had to explain to me. But, then the same goes for Americans. Some of the TV shows that people talk about that they grew up on, and I have no idea what they're talking about.

For Brent (hidden immigrant, high variance, business subpopulation), being behind on popular culture affected the way his home-country peers treated to him:

It's been a lot of confusion. It's been a lot of confusion and uncertainty, especially relating to, like I've said, just kind of the identity I guess. Like I've said, I don't consider myself Scottish but everyone here generally does, and in Scotland and in all of Europe I was an American. That's been hard to deal with, and it's manifested itself in odd ways...I remember one time we were all sitting in someone's [dorm] room and there was a group of maybe six or seven of us, and I was sitting in the middle of the room and they were talking about Halloween costumes, and I haven't had a Halloween in five years. So, that felt kind of odd. Then they were talking about all these TV shows, and most of them were TV shows I have never heard of or ones that I don't remember very well...so I was always having to ask, "What's that TV show? What happens in that?" Then, at some point someone made a remark about a show they all knew...I didn't know what it was. So, the person said [something about] the TV show and everyone kind of gasped like, "Oh yeah!" I interrupted that by saying, "Wait, what's that?" Several of them were like, "Don't worry about it. You're Scottish."

## Support

The theme of support focuses on the positive aspect of the first-year experience. Participants offered first-hand accounts of the ways faculty, staff, family, third-culture students, and internationals had a positive influence on their first-year transition.

Table 4.8  
*Themes Related to Support*

Themes	Frequency	Participants
Connecting with faculty and staff	12	1, 2, 4, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 22
Support from family and friends	12	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 11, 15, 16, 21, 23, 24

***Connecting With Faculty and Staff.*** Anna (hidden immigrant, low variance, government subpopulation) had a high level of engagement with her advisors in her job on campus and used them as resources whenever she had questions:

I have a federal work study job advising in the School of International Studies. I work with them, which is nice because I get one-on-one time with them. So, every once in a while if I have a question, I'll like sneak in and ask them. I mean, I have a good relationship with the advisors I work with.

Amy (hidden immigrant, high variance, missionary subpopulation) shared about how much she appreciated faculty at Columbia International University because they made personal efforts to be involved in students' lives:



The faculty here really surprised me by being involved. Our school has a futbol—a soccer team—and one of my professors comes to the games. And, I coach baseball in the spring, and she tries to come to my games and just the fact that, you know, a university professor actually cares to show up at a game was pretty cool. Also how interested they are in hearing about how our culture influences our learning and our views on what weren't learning. I'm taking a class right now, Marriage and Family, and my [host] culture definitely has different views on marriage and family than the American culture does.

The learning community that Saranya (foreigner, low variance, government subpopulation) was a part of helped with her college adjustment by connecting her with faculty and students. Several students from Lewis and Clark College talked about staff members in the International Student Services (ISS) office who made personal efforts to recruit and get to know them. For example, Bill (hidden immigrant, low variance, business subpopulation) pointed out that the Office of International Student Services [ISS] had posted photographs of all of the third-culture students at the College around their office and knew each student by name. Bill described the ISS staff as “very active” and involved.

***Support From Family and Friends.*** One of the ways participants have experienced support from family and friends was through having a parent in the United States during their adjustment. Anna (hidden immigrant, low variance, government subpopulation) shared that her mother repatriated to the same city when she came back to the United States for college and that this helped with her transition:

It was a lot easier for my sister and I to adjust to just because my mom's here. So, even when everything else is like crazy and more complicated, my mom is nearby. We all have a really good relationship with my mom, so it's easier.

Brent (hidden immigrant, high variance, business subpopulation) also felt it was helpful to have extended family nearby stating, "Part of the reason I came here is because my grandparents are very close by. I guess I felt I had a safety net."

Some participants talked about how friends had helped make the transition easier. When asked why she chose to attend American University after leaving Panama, Allison (hidden immigrant, low variance, government subpopulation) said, "A lot of the Panamanians...always end up in DC or Boston so I have a lot of friends that are really, really close. That was a huge factor." Others found support in other third-culture students. Robert (hidden immigrant, medium variance, government subpopulation) noted,

I guess TCKs are kind of like a rock because we all understand each other.

We've all basically gone through the same, I guess you could call it, a circuit. A lot of the TCKs would have gone to the same schools at one point in their lives, at least there are lots of various little circuits that they all run on.

***Additional Observations.*** The researcher noted several formal and informal supportive efforts on behalf of third-culture students at three site locations: (a) American University—participants were involved with international student services staff to plan several social events for third-culture students during the semester; (b) Lewis and Clark College—the ISS office sponsored TCK Thursday, a bi-weekly event where third-culture students met informally for a social hour or for a presentation and discussion; and (c)

Columbia International University—Crossover Communications, an organization hosting reentry orientations for missionary students coming to college in South Carolina was located on the same property as CIU.

## Home

The concept of home appeared to be very complex for third-culture students in this study. Explaining home to country-of-origin peers proved to be challenging for some of the students. Additionally, participants shared that missing their family home had an effect on their first-year transition because communication with family members still living overseas seemed more difficult than for those who had relations residing in the United States.

Table 4.9  
*Themes Related to the Concept of Home*

Themes	Frequency	Participants
Explaining home to peers	10	3, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 21
Homesickness	6	6, 8, 11, 13, 14, 23

***Explaining Home to Peers.*** The concept of home is clearly one of confusion for many third-culture students. Sometimes, participants described home as a physical location where their parents owned property or were currently living. For instance, Robert (hidden immigrant, medium variance, government subpopulation) stated, “Egypt is really my home, I mean, as much of a home as I can have. My dad and my mom actually invested money and built a house there.” Megan (hidden immigrant, low variance, government subpopulation) also reflected on home as a physical place: “I

consider home basically wherever I physically am. I guess I don't have a sense of belonging to one place." Several students claimed a city in the United States as their home because it was easier than explaining their overseas upbringing to American peers. Ellen explained,

I met one of my best friends during orientation, and then during welcome week he knew about like me living overseas my whole life. So, during welcome week I would just say I'm from Pittsburgh because I have family there, we have a house there. Every time I said that and he was around, he would be like, "Ellen, you're a liar, stop it, tell the truth."

Leah (hidden immigrant, high variance, missionary subpopulation), a sophomore, reflected on what home meant during her first year of college. She described feeling rootless and longed for the normalcy of her American peers:

Now that I've gone to most of the homes of my close friends—like, I went to Colorado for spring break, I went to Florida over the summer and South Carolina—I don't have that to show people. Like, they'll talk about their friends, and I can actually understand their whole lives now, but I've never had that to show people. So, I really feel like in that first year, I had a very rootless feel. I went back and forth to loving that of not having any obligations to a hometown and not having anything pulling me back to being like homesick for a home I just don't have and for wanting something that was never going to go anywhere, like wanting a hometown that I could always go back to and neighbors that would always be there.

***Homesickness.*** One of the biggest challenges for third-culture students is

missing home. While homesickness is a common experience for many first-year students during their college transition, this was compounded for third-culture students with families living on another continent. The consequences of living so far away were apparent to Katherine (hidden immigrant, low variance, business subpopulation) and Cindy (hidden immigrant, high variance, government subpopulation) when they remarked:

I think that's the worst thing, like the thing that I struggle with the most, is not knowing when I'm going to be able to see my mom again. (Katherine)

I think a struggle would be just getting used to not being around family the entire time, like being away from them more than a month or two months at a time. Just also having to relate back to a culture by yourself. Because when you're with your family, you can just all be really together, like some things they'll pick up on. For instance, my mom was like, I just think it's rude you've got your hand in your lap and you're eating. So, she would be able to tell me that, and we'd be able to just learn stuff together. Whereas here I just have to basically relearn everything by myself. (Cindy)

Leah (hidden immigrant, high variance, missionary subpopulation) added, "It's different also living so far away from my parents and my two sisters. We pretty much live on three different continents. So, I don't have the chance to call everyday like my roommate does and stuff."

Missing home was not limited to family but also encompassed a place as Hannah explained:

I guess the biggest challenge overall was just missing home. I miss the view so much, because I had an amazing view at my house. I just miss Switzerland. It's so beautiful. Here, I find it so depressing, like driving through Portland, it's the strip malls. (Hannah)

## **SUMMARY OF EMERGENT THEMES**

The five major themes—Identity, Relationship With Peers, Culture Shock, Support, and Home—were examined in light of how participants related to their surrounding culture in terms of norms, values, and beliefs. All of the participants reported that they felt different from their home-country peers or did not identify with an American mindset. Slightly more participants demonstrated a low level of difference ( $n = 10$ ) compared to a high level ( $n = 9$ ), and six participants were in the middle of the spectrum. Further, some found dealing with culture shock or relating to American peers more challenging than others. The following section addresses differences found among the different subpopulations of third-culture students in this study.

## Frequency Among Subpopulations

Table 4.10

*Theme Frequency Among Subpopulations*

	Business (n = 13)	Government (n = 6)	Military <sup>a</sup> (n = 1)	Missionary (n = 6)
<i>Identity</i>				
Non-American identity (n = 25)	13	6	1 <sup>a</sup>	6
Feels different from peers (n = 15)	11	2	*	2
<i>Relationships With Peers</i>				
Connecting with internationals (n = 12)	6	3	*	3
Difficulty making friends (n = 9)	5	2	*	2
<i>Culture Shock</i>				
Alcohol restrictions (n = 9)	6	2	1 <sup>a</sup>	*
Behind in popular culture (n = 9)	4	2	1 <sup>a</sup>	2
<i>Support</i>				
Connecting with faculty and staff (n = 12)	6	2	1 <sup>a</sup>	3
Support from family and friends (n = 12)	5	5	*	2
<i>Home</i>				
Explaining home to peers	5	4	*	1
Homesickness	3	1	*	2

<sup>a</sup> Small sample size; data not included in theme analysis

Based on the findings, the business subpopulation students had the greatest difficulty with identity issues and feeling different or not being able to relate to American norms with 8 out of 13 of these participants experiencing medium to high levels of differentness. Within the relationship with peers theme, difficulty making friends had a

low response rate and did not seem to be a significant challenge for any one particular subpopulation. As an overall group, one third of the government subpopulation students experienced challenges with culture shock compared to the other subpopulations, although nearly half of the business subpopulation also identified with this theme. The government subpopulation students reported the highest level of support, while the business subpopulation experienced the least amount of support in the first semester of college. Explaining the concept of home was most difficult for government subpopulation participants.

Considering all five major themes, business subpopulation third-culture students were the most likely of the subpopulations to encounter the most challenges in their repatriation process during their first year of college. Further implications will be addressed in the concluding chapter.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of third-culture students who repatriated to the United States for their first year of college. Specifically, similarities and differences within the four third-culture student subpopulations identified by Cottrell (2002)—business, diplomat, military, and missionary—were examined. Pollock and Van Reken’s (2001) four-category, cultural domain taxonomy provided the conceptual framework and unique lens to view the participants’ relationships with their home culture and subsequent impact on the ease or difficulty of their college transition. Data analysis using this context resulted in the development of a theory of variance among the four domains. While it may be common for first-year students to experience challenges when adapting academically and socially in college, the present study explored potential challenges in terms of the added cultural adjustment component that third-culture students face.

The majority of participants in the study reported that they did not fully identify with the American culture or felt different from their American peers in terms of values, beliefs, and norms, which was a projected outcome based on a review of the literature. Previous research has shown that third-culture students typically find that (a) their home-country peers have a different worldview or behaviors or (b) their country of origin is

unfamiliar or changed when they repatriate (Fontaine, 1983; Gaw, 1995; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001).

A major unexpected finding of this work was the significant variation observed among the students in terms of the differentness they felt from their country-of-origin peers or the overall American culture. Furthermore, the expressed levels of differentness and reported degree difficulty with the first-year college transition appeared to be related to one another. An additional unanticipated finding was the discovery that among the four subpopulations, third-culture students whose parents are business workers experienced the greatest degree of difficulty with identity issues. These findings are highly significant for the body of research on third-culture students since previous studies typically include intergroup comparisons (see chapter 2). This chapter discusses these findings, explores the potential implications of these outcomes on institutions of higher education, and provides recommendations for future areas of study.

## **CONCLUSIONS FROM THE FINDINGS**

### **Theme of Support**

Using Pollock and Van Reken's (2001) cultural domain framework to explore participants' relationships with their home culture, five major themes—Identity, Relationships With Peers, Culture Shock, Support, and Concept of Home—emerged from the data that demonstrated the ways third-culture students transition during the first year of college. These data reflect the primary research question for the study (i.e., What are the transition experiences of third-culture students in their first year of college?). Based on Gaw's (1995) work, which demonstrated the negative effects of reverse culture shock on individuals repatriating, and Pollock and Van Reken (2001) findings reporting the

challenges associated with reentry, it was anticipated in this study that students would report difficulties adjusting to college when they repatriated to the United States. While all of the third-culture students in this study reported feeling different than their home-culture peers or the overall American culture, the number that actually described difficulty adjusting (i.e., struggle making friends, dealing with culture shock) in the first year of college was much smaller than expected—less than half of the participants.

One of the major emergent themes, Support, provided a reason for this unexpected outcome. Almost half ( $n = 12$ ) of the participants of the study reported feeling supported during their first-year transition. These students described support as connecting with faculty and staff members, making friends with international students, and/or having a parent or close relation in the United States. Dalton and Crosby (2008) indicate that support is necessary during “those inevitable times of vulnerability, uncertainty, and failure that can threaten to overwhelm a student” (p. 1). Additionally, at three of the research sites (i.e., American University, Columbia International University, and Lewis and Clark College) faculty and staff included third-culture students in international orientation programs and intentionally connected third-culture students with each other through various planned social events. Therefore, while the number of participants who reported transition difficulties was lower than expected, this could be attributed to the influence support mechanisms had on participants’ experiences.

The theme of Support from faculty, staff, family, and friends also emerged in the analysis of the third-culture student subpopulations. In comparison to the other groups, the business subpopulation students were most likely to face challenges in their first-year transitions. They had the highest frequency of feeling different from peers and a higher

incidence of reported difficulty with culture shock (i.e., dealing with alcohol restrictions, being behind on the popular culture). The business subpopulation students also reported the lowest levels of support in the first year of college.

## **Variance in Cultural Domains**

The cultural domain taxonomy was used to examine intragroup comparisons (i.e., between all four subpopulations) as well as intergroup assessments (i.e., between third-culture students and their country-of-origin peers). While intergroup differences were expected, the degree of intragroup variation was an unforeseen finding that had important implications for this work. All of the participants reported feelings of differentness from the American culture or their home-culture peers; however, only eight out of 26 of these students felt this impacted their transition in a significant way. Seven described a slight impact on their experience, and 13 students indicated that there was no impact on their experience. Further, within the subpopulations of third-culture students, there was a diversity of experiences. The majority ( $n = 4$ ) of government subpopulation students reported that their differentness had no impact on their first-year experience; whereas, for the majority of business subpopulation students, their differentness had a low to medium ( $n = 5$ ) or high ( $n = 4$ ) level of impact on their experiences. The finding of differences between the subpopulations is significant since the body of research dating back to 1962 (e.g., Cottrell, 2002; Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Useem, 1962, 1993) has treated third-culture students as a homogenous group with discussions on comparisons or differences with country-of-origin peers reflecting this presupposed homogeneity.

***Feels Different.*** In terms of the major emergent theme Identity, as stated earlier, all of the participants expressed either feeling different than their American peers

or a lack of identification with American culture. The researcher attributes the variance noted among the participants to Phinney's model of ethnic identity development (1990) because it offered insight on why third-culture students might struggle to explain their third-culture identity. Phinney indicates that in the early stages of ethnic identity, issues with ethnicity have not yet been explored. The majority of students ( $n = 21$ ) participated in the interviews three months after repatriating to the United States to attend college. It is possible that this time frame did not allow individuals time to explore their feelings and attitudes regarding their own ethnicity. Also, four out of the eight students who experienced a high level of differentness were sophomore students reflecting on their first year in college. These participants had more time to reflect on their experiences and were most likely farther along in their identity development.

***Concept of Home.*** A finding that emerged from the major theme of Home was that the government subpopulation participants, as a whole (i.e., four out of six, representing two-thirds of the entire group), had the greatest difficulty explaining the concept of home to their peers. This outcome is most likely associated with the data from the demographic survey that revealed this subpopulation had the highest average number of moves from country to country ( $n = 5$ ).

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

### **Creating a Supportive Environment**

Students in this study described three areas of support that facilitated their first-year transition: (a) the ability to connect with faculty and staff members, (b) making friends with international students, and (c) having a parent or close relative in the United States. While it is impossible to control for family support, institutions can provide

opportunities for students to connect with faculty and staff members as well as create environments where students can connect with international students. For example, at Lewis and Clark University, third-culture students are given an opportunity to live in an international student residence hall. At American University, students were given the option to live in an international-themed, living-learning community.

Additionally, simply creating a space for students to tell their stories encourages them to process their feelings about their transitions and move forward in their identity development. This can have a positive impact on their transitional experiences as illustrated in this comment from Rachel in response to participating in the one-on-one interview for the study, “No one has ever asked to hear my story. They usually just want to know what my parents do.” Educators have a tremendous opportunity to listen to students and validate their experiences.

### **Be Cognizant of Potential Challenge of Distance**

Many first-year students experience a sense of loss as a result of the changes of being in a new environment; some experience despair when relationships change or are replaced (Paul & Sigal, 2001). In addition to these kinds of challenges, third-culture students may struggle with geographic distance (i.e., family and friends living on different continents) and time barriers (i.e., family and friends live in different time zones). Institutions can accommodate third-culture students in a number of ways as they transition into the college environment. For example, designating a space in a residence hall where students can talk with their friends and family in the middle of the night without disrupting a roommate is one way to support these students in the residential setting.

## **Tracking Third-Culture Students**

By selecting participants, this study revealed that it is difficult to identify third-culture students on college and university campuses. With the challenges of repatriation in addition to the demands of the first year of college, knowing who these students are is an essential step in aiding their transition.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

### **Guiding Future Research**

The qualitative methods employed in this study uncovered stories that revealed thick, rich descriptions about the transition experiences of third-culture students who repatriated back to the United States for college. The five major themes addressed the nuances of their adjustment in the first year of college and can be used to direct future research efforts. The following suggested directions for future research will potentially strengthen the extant research on this population of students.

### **Diversify Site Locations**

While the sites selected for this study were geographically diverse, the majority of institutions had dedicated campus services to meeting third-culture student needs. Students who received support from a college department (e.g., international student services) were, therefore, potentially likely to have a different experience from students on university campuses where there are no systems of support. Future research should include institutions that do not make an intentional effort to support these students to determine if their challenges are greater, and if so, to what extent and in what ways.

Ways to recruit participants at these types of institutions could be through social network media (e.g., Facebook group) and a snowball effect with students from previous studies serving as a point of contact.

## **Longitudinal Research**

The findings of this study, while important in terms of capturing the experiences of students in their first semester of college, reflect only a portion of the greater college experience. Longitudinal research that tracks students through their four or more years will garner rich data on how a cross-cultural upbringing can affect other parts of the college experience, and ultimately, help them persist to graduation. Further, longitudinal research would provide an opportunity to look more closely at the effects of the third-culture experience on identity development.

## **Country Affiliation**

In the present study, participants were from different parts of the world where levels of immersion varied. Future research could focus on one particular geographical region (e.g., the Middle East or Europe) to control for some of the potential variation.

## **Continued Research on the Subpopulations**

Data on the experiences of subpopulations were one of the intended outcomes of this study and was one of the major findings of the study. Future studies that examine the experiences of subpopulations would triangulate the data by “cross-checking data from multiple sources to search for regularities in the research data” (O’Donoghue & Punch, 2003, p. 78).



## CONCLUSION

This dissertation study focused on the transition experiences of third-culture students who repatriated to the United States to attend college. The study was guided by three major research questions that explored (a) the transitional experiences of third-culture students in their first year of college, (b) commonalities and differences among the experiences of subpopulations, and (c) whether physical and attitudinal attributes differentiate third-culture students along a spectrum of variance. The findings that emerged from five major qualitative themes (i.e., Identity, Relationships With Peers, Culture Shock, Support, and Concept of Home) were analyzed according to subpopulations which revealed that students whose parents are international business workers are most likely to face challenges related to identity in their first year. This particular finding provides opportunities for further research on third-culture student subpopulations. Further, it serves to inform educators serving third-culture student populations.

Also important to the study was the finding that there were varying levels of difference among participants in this study. While third-culture students may share some commonalities, this finding serves as a reminder that these students have unique experiences that affect these students in different ways.

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# APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

[SURVEY PREVIEW MODE] Third Culture Student Survey- Lewis and Clark College

3/1/10 4:26 PM

## Third Culture Student Survey- Lewis and Clark College

[Exit this survey](#)

### 1. Default Section

#### 1. Please indicate what year this is for you at Lewis and Clark College.

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

Other (please specify)

#### 2. What is your current age?

17 or younger

18-20

21 or older

#### 3. What is your ethnicity?

Asian, or Asian American, including Chinese, Japanese, and others

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latino, including Mexican American, Central American, and others

White, Caucasian, Anglo, European American

Other (please specify)

#### 4. In what country or countries do you hold citizenship?

[Next](#)

## Third Culture Student Survey- Lewis and Clark College

[Exit this survey](#)**2.**

**5. Have you ever lived outside of the U.S. for more than two years between the ages of 5-18? (If your answer is no, please skip to question 8.)**

Yes

No

If yes, please list the country or countries and the approximate ages you lived there.

**6. Which of the following best describes your reason for moving outside of the U.S.?**

Moved outside of the U.S. because at least one of your parents is a missionary.

Moved outside of the U.S. because at least one of your parents are in a branch of the military.

Moved outside of the U.S. because at least one of your parents wanted to pursue international business.

Moved outside of the U.S. because at least one of your parents is in the diplomatic corps.

Other (please specify)

**7. What calendar year did you last return to the United States?**

Please indicate  
month/year:

Month

Year

Prev

Next

Third Culture Student Survey- Lewis and Clark College

Exit this survey

3.

**8. The questions in this survey are part of a research project about global nomads in their first year of college. I would really appreciate the opportunity to talk with you further about your experiences living outside of the United States as well as in your first year of college. If you are willing to talk with me via phone or in person, please indicate your name and the best way for me to get in touch with you. As a thank you for your time, your name will be entered into a drawing for a \$50 gift card to Barnes and Noble.**

No

Yes (Please indicate name and contact info)

PrevNext

Thank you for taking the time to complete this short survey!

Note: Questions adapted from Klemens (2008) demographic survey. Permission to reproduce some of the questions granted by the author.

## APPENDIX B: PERMISSION TO USE SURVEY

Dottie,

It sounds like a very interesting study. I'm curious as to how you came across my dissertation and the demographics survey. You do have my permission to use my demographics survey, which I created. Do you have a copy? Please make sure it is only the demographics survey you are using and not the other measures which are attributable to other researchers. If you have questions or uncertainties, please let me know. If you publish your dissertation please also notify me. Best of luck on your research.

Michael Klemens, PhD

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**From: WEIGEL, DOTTIE [WEIGEL@mailbox.sc.edu]**  
**Sent: Tuesday, August 25, 2009 12:51 PM**  
**To: Klemens, Michael**  
**Subject: TCK Research**

Michael,

I am a doctoral student at the University of South Carolina, and I am currently doing my dissertation research on TCKs in their first year of college. I am specifically looking at their transition in light of Bridges (2003) theory of managing transitions as well as the literature on the first-year college experience. I am planning to interview students at two institutions (Lewis and Clark University and Columbia International University) and am looking to administer a demographical survey before I narrow the pool of participants. In my research, I found the "demographics survey" you used in your dissertation and thought it was very well written and could be very helpful in the selection of my participants. Did you create this survey yourself? If so, would you be willing to let me use the questions in my survey if I give you proper credit in my dissertation? Thanks so much, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Dottie Weigel

\*\*\*\*\*

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## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

### **Interview Protocol**

*The majority of our interview time will be spent talking about your current experiences in college. However, I am very interested to start by learning more about you and your past experiences (the places you lived, where you grew up).*

### **Past Experiences**

- 1) To get started, can you tell me about the different places you lived growing up? (Probe: Did you live on a base, in a compound, or in the native community? What was it like making friends? Learning a new culture?)
- 2) In terms of the surrounding cultures where you grew up, can you describe your relationship with those around you? (Probe: Were your friends natives or other Americans/internationals? Were there any challenges with acclimating to a new culture? If you lived in more than one country, was there one in which you felt most at home or identified the most? Why?)

### **Coming to College**

*Okay, we're going to shift gears here and talk about your transition to college.*

- 1) Could you start by telling me how you made the decision to attend [name of institution]? (Probe: What role did your family, teachers, or peers play in the decision making process? Did you consider other institutions? If so, which ones and why did you decide against those?)
- 2) Can you tell me about the process of moving back to the United States? (Probe: What do you remember most about the first week on campus? Did your family also move back to the U.S. at this time? Were there any challenges that you experienced with this transition?)
- 3) What were some of the expectations coming into college in the U.S.? (Probe: Since you've returned, did anything surprise you? What were some of your first impressions?)

### **Current Experiences**

*Okay, we are going to transition again and talk about your academic and social experiences during your first semester of college.*

- 1) In what ways have your expectations of college changed over the course of your first semester? (Probe: Your peers, your studies, your professors?)
- 2) How would you describe a typical weekend since coming to college? Do you feel this is similar or different than what other first-year students at [name of institution] are doing?
- 3) Can you describe your closest friends on campus? (Probe: Are they other third-culture students, international students, or other students?)
- 4) How would you describe your relationship with your family since coming to college? (Probe: Has this relationship changed? In what ways?)
- 5) What have classes been like for you? (Probe: Can you describe your relationship with faculty members? Advisors? Peers in your classes? Others?)
- 6) Have you experienced any challenges in the first semester? If so, how have you sought to overcome the challenges?
- 7) What are some of the similarities and differences between you and those around you currently? (Probe: What about your outlook on life—would you say your outlook is similar to or different from those around you? Is there one particular culture (of the places you have lived or currently live) that has influenced you most? Why?)
- 8) Do you intend to return to [name of institution] next year? Why or why not?
- 9) Is there anything else you want to tell me about your college experience?

## APPENDIX D: ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

RQ #1: What are the transition experiences (e.g., forming friendships, acclimating to the campus culture) of third-culture students in their first year of college?

RQ #2: In what ways, if any, do the experiences of subpopulations (i.e., children of diplomatic corps, international business workers, military personnel, missionaries) vary from group to group?

RQ #3: What physical and attitudinal attributes differentiate third-culture students along a spectrum of variance?

Research Question	Interview Protocol	Anticipated Analytic Strategies
RQ # 1 RQ # 3	To get started, can you tell me about the different places you lived growing up? (Probe: Did you live on a base, in a compound, or in the native community? What was it like making friends? Learning a new culture?)	Cultural Domains
RQ # 1 RQ # 3	In terms of the surrounding cultures where you grew up, can you describe your relationship with those around you? (Probe: Were your friends natives or other Americans/internationals? Were there any challenges with acclimating to a new culture? If you lived in more than one country, was there one in which you felt most at home or identified the most? Why?)	Cultural Domains  Constant Comparative Method
RQ # 1 RQ # 2 RQ # 3	Could you start by telling me how you made the decision to attend [name of institution]? (Probe: What role did your	Constant Comparative

	family, teachers, or peers play in the decision making process? Did you consider other institutions? If so, which ones and why did you decide against those?)	Method
RQ # 1 RQ # 3	Can you tell me about the process of moving back to the United States? (Probe: What do you remember most about the first week on campus? Did your family also move back to the U.S. at this time? Were there any challenges that you experienced with this transition?)	Constant Comparative Method  Cultural Domains
RQ # 1 RQ # 2 RQ # 3	What were some of the expectations coming into college in the U.S.? (Probe: Since you've returned, did anything surprise you? What were some of your first impressions?)	Constant Comparative Method
RQ # 1 RQ # 3	In what ways have your expectations of college changed over the course of your first semester? (Probe: Your peers, your studies, your professors?)	Constant Comparative Method
RQ # 1 RQ # 3	How would you describe a typical weekend since coming to college? Do you feel this is similar or different than what other first-year students at [name of institution] are doing?	Constant Comparative Method
RQ # 1 RQ # 2 RQ # 3	Could you describe your closest friends on campus? (Probe: In what ways do you connect with these individuals?)	Constant Comparative Method
RQ # 1 RQ # 3	How would you describe your relationship with your family since coming to college? (Probe: Has this relationship changed? In what ways?)	Constant Comparative Method
RQ # 1 RQ # 3	What have classes been like for you? (Probe: Can you describe your relationship with faculty members? Peers in your classes? Others?)	Constant Comparative Method
RQ # 1	Have you experienced any challenges in	

RQ # 2 RQ # 3	the first semester? If so, how have you sought to overcome the challenges?	Constant Comparative Method
RQ # 1 RQ # 2 RQ # 3	What are some of the similarities and differences between you and those around you currently? (Probe: Would you say you different or similar in terms of ethnicity? What about your outlook on life—would you say your cultural lens is similar or different than those around you?)	Constant Comparative Method  Cultural Domains
RQ # 1 RQ # 2 RQ # 3	Do you intend to return to [name of institution] next year? Why or why not?	Constant Comparative Method

## APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Third-Culture Students: An Exploratory Study of Transition in the First Year of College  
Dottie Weigel (principal investigator)

This study has been designed to extend what is known about third-culture students in their first year of college. As a first-year, third-culture student at American University, you are being asked to participate because your experience is of value to this study. The knowledge gained can be used to help improve programs for first-year, third-culture students.

The data collected from this study will be used in my dissertation and will be shared with my committee and potentially published once accepted by my committee. Your participation is voluntary, and you will have the opportunity to discontinue participation at any time. Your name will be kept confidential and changed in all of the interview transcripts and in my final dissertation. Also, you will have the opportunity to review the written transcripts before I submit them to my committee for review.

As a result of participating in this study, your name will be entered into a drawing for a \$50 gift card to Barnes and Noble Bookstores. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you will still have the opportunity to be part of the drawing.

Thank you in advance for the time you are giving me as well as your honest answers to my demographic survey and interview questions. If you should have any questions about the study or the interview process, please feel free to contact me at [weigel@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:weigel@mailbox.sc.edu) or by phone at (803)528-8484.

Thank you,

Dottie Weigel  
Principal Investigator

---

Participant's Printed Name

---

Participant's Signature

---

Date

## APPENDIX F: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

October 8, 2009

Dr. Dorothy Weigel  
College of Education  
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies  
Columbia, SC 29208

Re: **Pro00004009**

Study entitled: *Third Culture Students: An Exploratory Study of Transition in the First Year of College*

FYI: University of South Carolina Assurance number: FWA 00000404 / IRB Registration number: 00000240

Dear Dr. Weigel:

In accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2), the referenced study is exempt from Research Subject Regulation. No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. However, you must inform this office of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research protocol could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this project was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three years after termination of the study.

If you have questions concerning the IRB process, please contact Arlene McWhorter at [arlenem@gwm.sc.edu](mailto:arlenem@gwm.sc.edu) or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,

*Thomas A. Coggins* (am)  
Thomas A. Coggins  
Director  
/am

University of South Carolina-Columbia, South Carolina – 803/777-7095 – Fax 803/576-5589